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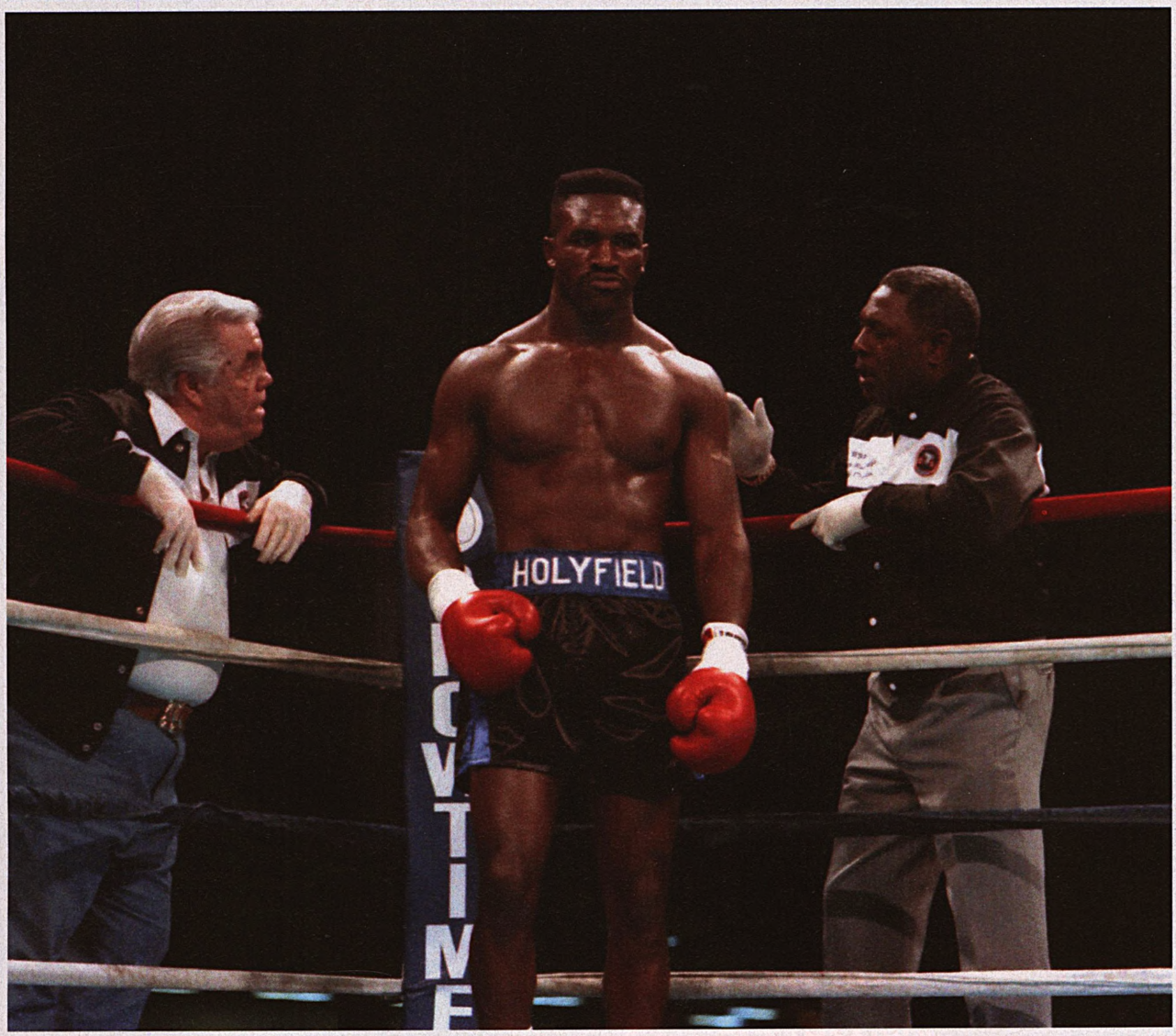

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The Real Deal flanked by co-manager Lou Duva (left) and trainer George Benson.

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OPENING SHOT

Deontay Wilder was hell-bent on knocking Tyson Fury out with his vaunted right-hand bomb for 11 rounds of their December 1 showdown in Los Angeles, but it was a follow-up left hook that almost made it happen. The punch from the WBC titleholder would have finished any other heavyweight – but not the lineal champ.

PHOTO BY HARRY HOW

THE END OF AN ERA

It has been many years since I wrote to this esteemed publication. I followed boxing obsessively as a young man then, and still today I see myself as a serious fan, well beyond that which might be termed "casual." Along with The Ring, a couple of other publications, as well as weekly programs found on basic cable, the other entity of the pre-internet age that nurtured my love of the sport was HBO Boxing. This program has provided the boxing world with some of its greatest nights ever, building the careers of countless legendary fighters in the process. So in September when I learned that HBO Boxing would come to end, I was truly crestfallen. Its demise, while probably sensible from a business standpoint, is like a death in the family for this great sport. There are other commentators as great as those on HBO. There have been other televised productions whose quality comes close to HBO. And there have been other networks that have been committed to offering good matchups and covering them with professionalism and aplomb. But no one ever brought together all of these qualities on a consistent basis as HBO has for close to a half century. HBO was there for the beginning of my life as a boxing fan, and I had hoped to grow old watching this network. I shall long mourn its end. I hope that some other network can somehow take on the mantle of offering boxing's preeminent television series. But perhaps in an era of constantly evolving technology, with so many choices for fans, no one will be able to replace HBO Boxing. It was truly of its time.

Br. Peter Cory, OP
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GIVE PAULIE A SCORECARD!

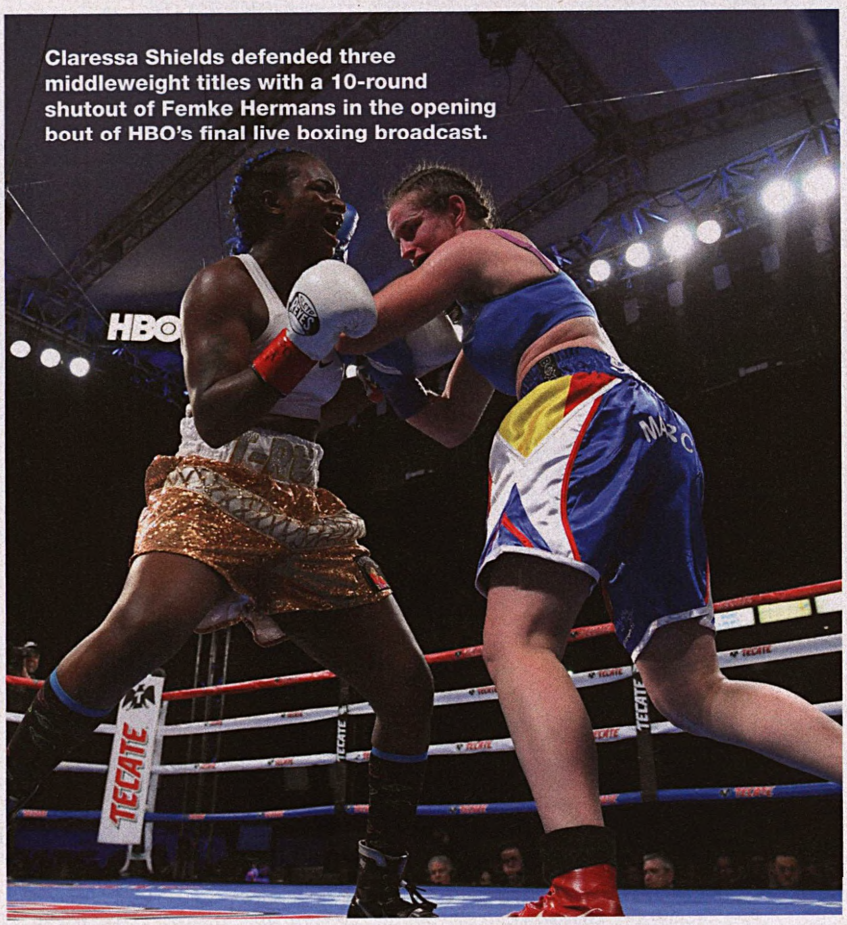
Recently, boxing fans were treated to two splendid major fights, Golovkin-Alvarez and Fury-Wilder. Both were exciting, but the judging of both left boxing looking like a particularly unworthy member of the sporting world. Can anything be done? Yes. The idea came to me while listening to Paulie Malignaggi, who opined that GGG clearly won the first of the two fights but won the second more narrowly. Why can't the ranks of judges be filled by former fighters, who actually know the sport? They may need a little training, but they are sure to be better than the current crop. Better judging can only help our sport take its rightful place in the public eye.

Bernard Freydberg
Gulfport, Florida

KEEP PAULIE AWAY FROM SCORECARDS!

The 12th round of Wilder vs. Fury had me out of bed and bouncing around. Wild finish. And NOT a bad draw decision. Yet for some reason, Paulie Malignaggi decided he was the grandmaster of scoring and couldn't get over the fact that a judge's scorecard was different than the imaginary one he wasn't even keeping track of. Now it's not too often I defend judges, but he lambasted the poor judge who had the fight scored only one round differently than ESPN's Dan Rafael. Come on, Paulie, you're better than that. Focus on the fight and ignore the scores; it doesn't help the sport.

Drew Adkins



Claressa Shields defended three middleweight titles with a 10-round shutout of Femke Hermans in the opening bout of HBO's final live boxing broadcast.

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Pictured left to right: Damon Allen Jr., Jessie Vargas, Fernando Vargas

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RINGSIDE BY EVANDER HOLYFIELD

THE WARRIOR WITHIN

I will always be proud of be-coming the undisputed cruiserweight champion of the world.

A lot of people forget I was actually a light heavyweight, but I could no longer make 175 pounds, so I moved up. At that time, a lot of guys came down from 200 pounds-plus to make 190 (the original cruiserweight limit), but I grew into that weight over time.

At 16 years old, I was 139 pounds. At 17, I was 147. At 18, I was 165. At 21, I was 178 and 6 feet tall. I kept growing because I was a late bloomer. An important thing in this sport is knowing what you have. I was a good boxer, I was strong and I was very confident, so size didn't make a difference.

In my 12th professional fight, I fought Dwight Muhammad Qawi for the WBA cruiserweight title, and that was a dangerous fight. Those 15 rounds gave me all the confidence I needed. Think about it – I went from eight rounds to 15. That was a scary thing, and fighters today won't even experience it.

Am I the best cruiserweight of all time? I was the best, but I guess each generation has the potential to be better. Is Aleksandr Usyk better than me because he became undisputed champion? I don't need to worry about that, because I got there first.

The thing is, back in those days, people would say cruiserweight ain't nothing and you ain't fighting nobody. Also, I was selling out arenas for $200,000 and Mike Tyson was selling out arenas for $2 million. My goal was to be the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world, and why have a goal if you're not gonna shoot at it?

When I moved up to heavyweight, I had to be aware of what I brought with me. I knew I brought speed, because I was faster than all of them. Most big guys don't know how to box, they just know how to hit hard, so I was lighting them all up.

I knew I could take a heavyweight punch, but you don't want to be hit by a heavyweight. People would ask, "What happens when you get hit by a big shot?" I said, "They'll hit me with one boulder, but I'll be hitting them with rocks – and I throw a lot of rocks." I always had to throw more punches. Hey, I would like to have been 6-foot-7 and 250 pounds, but I wasn't made that way. I had to use what I had.

Usyk is a real good fighter, he's got real skills and he's a left-hander. He's moving up, but heavyweights are bigger today, so I think it could be difficult for him. Usyk is gonna be fighting guys who are 6-foot-9. In my day, the heavyweights were big, but they couldn't bounce around like I could. I had good wheels; I could roll in and roll out. I could do all these things, and Usyk will need to do them too.

It also depends on who he fights. I was told I would get murdered fighting Riddick Bowe on the outside, so I went inside and he was great on the inside too. We had some great boxers at heavyweight, but in today's era the amateur program – at least in America – is not as good as it was. That's showing up when it comes to the boxing ability of the big guys.

Usyk might move very fast at heavyweight. The reason I was inspired to do it is because Tyson was the heavyweight champion of the world. When we were amateurs, he was heavier than me and I was able to do well with him (in sparring). He hit harder, but my arms were longer than his. He could hit hard with one shot, but I can hit you all day and all night.

Now, I heard that Usyk did well with (Wladimir) Klitschko in sparring. If that's the case, then he already knows he can do well with heavyweights.

It won't be easy for him, but becoming heavyweight champion of the world should never be easy.

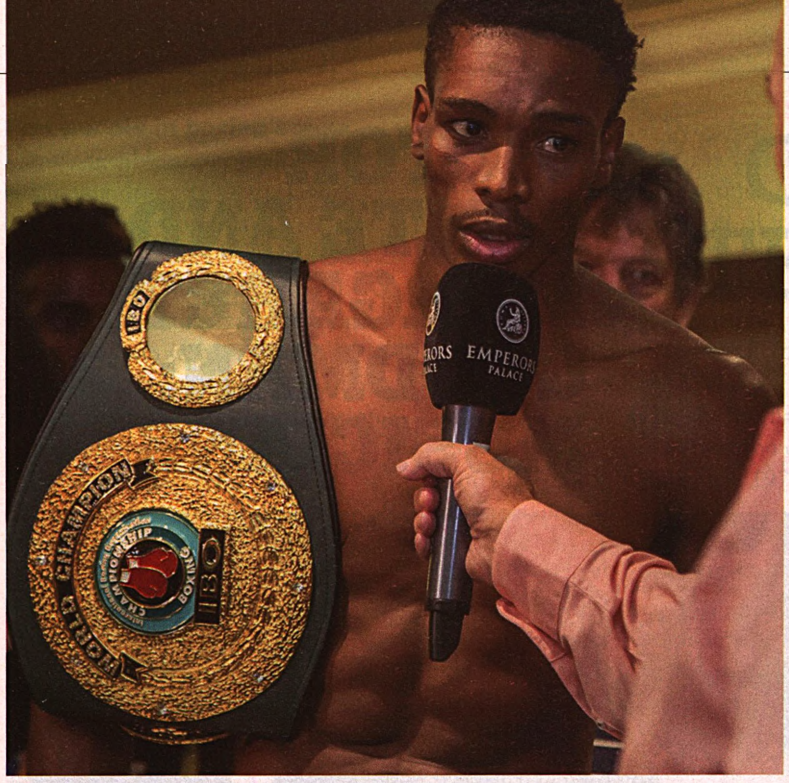
ROUND 1

FIGHTER OF THE MONTH ★ NEW FACES ★ AND MORE!

Tyson Fury fooled the boxing world again by shaking off ring rust and personal demons to hold heavily favored Deontay Wilder to a controversial draw.

TYSON FURY

There was no doubt who the Fighter of the Month would be for this issue, but it's a challenge to list all the reasons why Tyson Fury deserves the accolade following his 12-round split-decision draw against WBC heavyweight titleholder Deontay Wilder. It could be because of his impressive return to the world-class level (before challenging for the title, Fury had taken part in two meaningless fights in three years). It could be because of the skills he exhibited for the majority of those 12 rounds against Wilder (Fury was largely dominant against an unbeaten champion who was making his eighth title defense). Or it could be because he got up from that savage two-punch combination in the 12th and final round (Fury looked unconscious but miraculously found his feet before scoring with some terrific blows of his own). The recognition Fury has received is a mixture of all these things juxtaposed alongside a more meaningful and complex fight. Fury's well-publicized battle with depression was a persistent theme throughout the buildup to the Wilder fight. It was abundantly clear that the Englishman was fighting for more than a world title belt and money. He wanted to prove to himself that he could come back from the brink, and he wanted to prove to others that they could do it too. He succeeded in doing both, and also proved that he is still one of the best heavyweights in the world today. RING



Thulani Mbenge is poised to showcase his talent in America in 2019.

DIRK HEYNS

NEW FACES

THULANI MBENGE

By **Anson Wainwright**

Thulani Mbenge is part of a new generation of exciting welterweight prospects looking to supplant the big names in one of boxing's toughest divisions.

Mbenge (15-0, 12 knockouts) made his mark with a banner 2018. He kicked things off with a wide decision over Diego Cruz before posting a career-best performance over the vastly more experienced former contender Diego Chaves, stopping the rugged Argentine in seven rounds. He closed out the year with a TKO of cagey former lightweight titleholder Miguel Vazquez after nine dominant rounds.

The 27-year-old darkhorse is pleased with his breakout year.

"It went very well," Mbenge told The Ring. "I'm preparing for big fights, so I have to break these guys down, not just (look for) one punch. I had to box and adjust to the movement."

The Vazquez victory was particularly important because his promoter, Rodney Berman, has brokered a deal with Lou DiBella to co-promote the South African. His U.S. debut is expected to take place in the first quarter of 2019.

"I'm very excited to start to work with Rodney and Gary (Pretorius) with Golden Gloves on Thulani Mbenge," said an enthused DiBella. "He's a very athletic kid that, while still raw, understands how to box already at a young age. You saw this versus Vazquez.

"He took some time behind the jab and knew the importance of working the body. He has a sharp corner behind him. Sean Smith is a very good young trainer. The body shot was what eventually led to them not coming out after the ninth.

"Look, Vazquez fought Canelo twice, and even though this was a while ago, he went the distance both times. (Mbenge) has a bright future. I'm excited to bring him to the U.S. and give him some exposure. It is only a matter of time before he will be in a significant fight in the welterweight division."

A showcase fight in America will be a far cry from the East London township where Mbenge grew up. As a child, "Tulz" was never far from trouble. He was 8 when he first discovered boxing and, like many before him, he feels the sport has played an integral role in his life.

"I was very naughty at school, so my teacher took me to boxing because I was always fighting," he said. "It was tough, because I come from a very disadvantaged background. We have a lot of social issues like drugs, crime, teenage pregnancies, economic issues, but boxing saved my life from all those things."

He was heavily influenced by former titleholders Welcome Ncita and Vuyani Bungu, who hail from the same area.

"Those are the guys who paved the way for me to be here today," he said proudly. "I saw how sport changed their lives. And I also became part of sport because those guys are motivating us to be part of sport, because they are celebrated all the time – not any sport but boxing."

Mbenge excelled as an amateur, and when he was 18, he was part of a local initiative for the elite boxers that included an exchange program to Germany. While there, he learned the language and met his now-godmother. The two remain very close and regularly visit each other.

He had more than 200 amateur bouts and represented his country at the 2011 World Championships and the 2014 Commonwealth Games, where he earned a bronze medal. Mbenge lost in the qualifying stages of the 2012 London Olympic Games.

South African amateur officials had hoped he'd remain in the unpaid ranks and compete at the 2016 Olympics. Mbenge had other ideas and initially was heavily courted by overseas promoters. He decided it was best to stay at home and learn his trade, however.

Now he has the opportunity to make a big impression in America.

"(Fighting in the U.S.) doesn't scare me," said Mbenge. "I'll go there and destroy (my opposition). Each and every time I (enter the ring), I have to give them good performances, and then I'll fight the best.

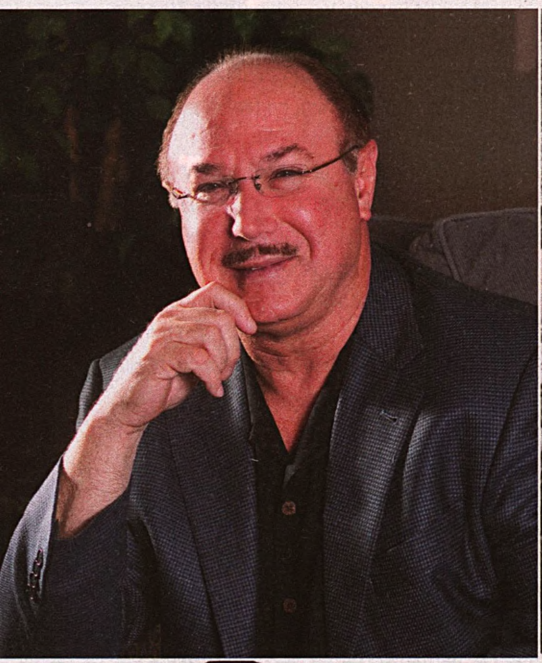
"I'm not far. There's (Shawn) Porter, (Errol) Spence, (Terence) Crawford … I just have to take my time. I'll fight anyone if the opportunity comes." RING

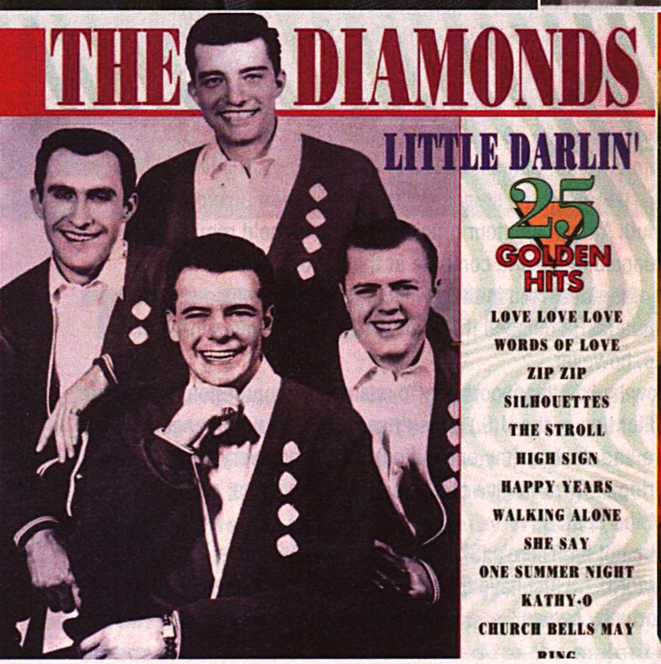
Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

JABS AND STRAIGHT WRITES

BY THOMAS HAUSER

VICTOR CONTE AND MARGARET GOODMAN: MUSICIANS





Sports nutrition guru and anti-doping advocate Victor Conte (top left) once played bass for R&B group Tower of Power (top right). The father of Dr. Margaret Goodman (bottom right), founder and CEO of the voluntary Anti-Doping Association, managed music acts in the 1950s and '60s, including The Diamonds.

Few people in boxing are as knowledgeable about performance-enhancing drugs as Victor Conte and Margaret Goodman.

Conte is known to sports fans as the mastermind behind the BALCO scandal. But that was just one of many chapters in his remarkable life to date. In recent years, he has been a positive force for education and reform.

Goodman served for years as chief ringside physician and chair of the medical advisory board for the Nevada State Athletic Commission. In addition to maintaining a private practice as a neurologist, she is the founder and current CEO of the Voluntary Anti-Doping Association.

But before any of that, Conte and Goodman were musicians.

Conte was born in 1950 and began taking guitar lessons at age 10. One year later, while in fifth grade, he played guitar in a talent show at the Wishon Elementary School in Fresno, California.

"I played a surf song called 'Pipeline,'" he remembers. "And it brought the house down. I thought it was the coolest thing."

At age 13, Conte and three of his cousins formed a band called Immediate Family. Victor played lead guitar while his cousins played bass guitar, saxophone and drums. At age 15, one of his brothers joined the group as lead guitarist and Victor switched to bass. Then, at age 19, he founded a group called Common Ground with some family and friends. They played a neighborhood club in Fresno six nights a week, for which each band member was paid $145.

In search of bigger and better things, Conte dropped out of Fresno City College and moved to Los Angeles, where he joined another group prophetically called Pure Food and Drug Act. One of his mentors in Los Angeles was Ray Brown, the legendary bass player who had once been married to Ella Fitzgerald. Brown taught Victor the ins and outs of playing the upright bass. Pure Food and Drug Act signed a lucrative contract with Epic Records and, for the first time in his life, Conte had money. Lots of it. "I was on top of the world," he recalls.

Meanwhile, one of Conte's cousins had become part of the funky rhythm-and-blues band Tower of Power. In May 1977, Victor joined the group as its electric bass player. He can be seen in action on YouTube in a September 28, 1977, performance.

Conte stayed with Tower of Power until 1979, when he and his cousin started another group called Jump Street. Later, he toured as an electric bass player with Herbie Hancock's Monster Band, an experience he calls "the height of my musical career." One night, he experienced the joy of playing onstage with the band and legendary trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie.

"But it was getting harder and harder to keep going," Conte says. "I loved playing. But by then, I was married with three kids, and being on the road is difficult. You kiss your kids goodbye and say, 'I'll see you in six months.' So I left the band in 1983. And in 1984, I founded BALCO."

Margaret Goodman was born in Toronto. Her father, Nat, played saxophone and clarinet, managed several rock groups and ultimately became a record producer. When she was 7, the family moved to Beverly Hills.

"*Broadway Danny Rose* was the story of my father's life," Goodman said years later. "In the 1950s, he managed a group called The Diamonds that had hits with 'Little Darlin',' 'Walking Along' and 'The Stroll.' He worked with Brook Benton and Dinah Washington. He started Sonny & Cher and the Righteous Brothers. But what always happened was he'd take them to a certain point, and then somebody big with a recording studio and more clout in the industry would come along and take them away from him."

Goodman's father taught Margaret to read music and sing and introduced her to nightclubs and concerts. He wanted her to be a doctor, but music was the love of her life. Finally, father and daughter had a heart-to-heart talk.

'If you want to be a studio singer," he told Margaret, "you'll do fine. But if you have your heart set on becoming the next Barbra Streisand, go to medical school.'"

Goodman enrolled at Chicago Medical School. But it was expensive and she had to make ends meet. While some of her contemporaries were partying their way out of medicine, Margaret worked her way through school by singing on weekends at nightclubs in Chicago. Old standards: Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Jerome Kern.

Conte still dabbles in music from time to time. In 2010, he wrote and recorded a song called "BALCO Bebop," in which he plays a "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" motif on bass guitar.

Does Conte miss being a full-time musician?

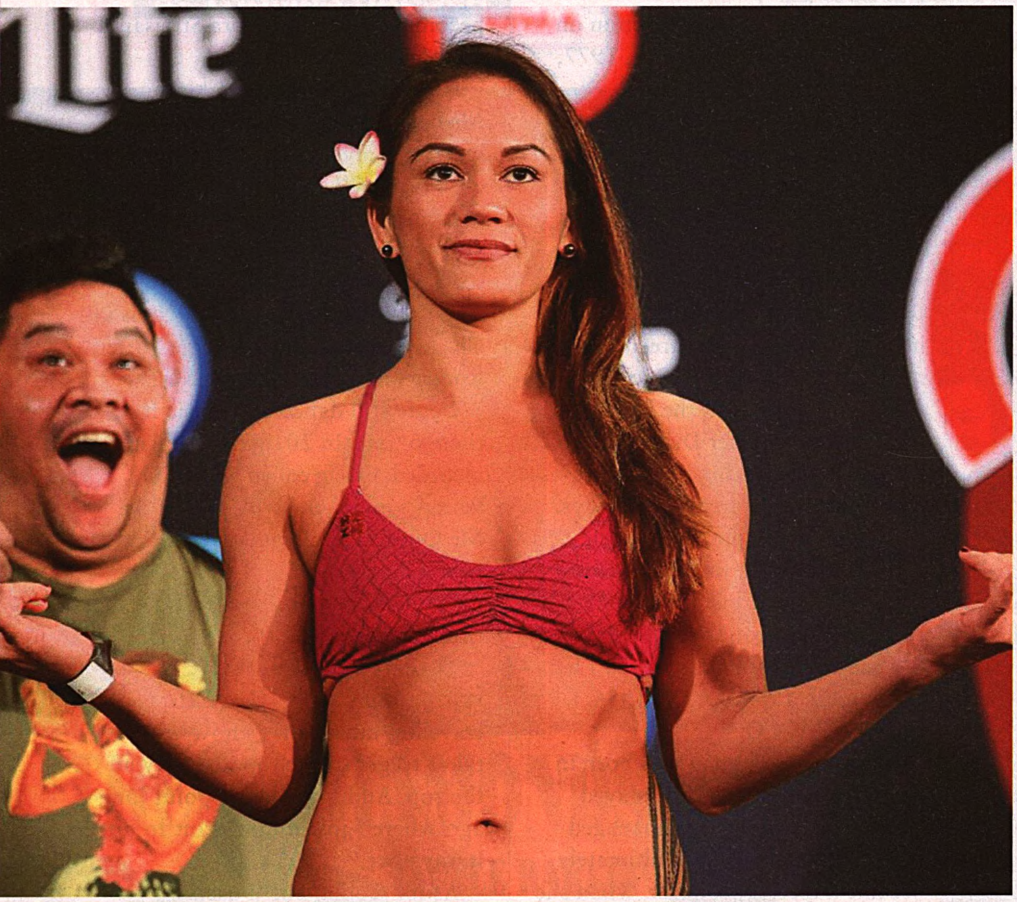
"Not at all," he answers. "I was on the road for 13 years as a traveling musician. I know what it takes to get to the top and stay at the top. And I reached a point long ago where I just didn't want to do it anymore."

As for Goodman, "I used to think I'd keep singing one way or another," Margaret acknowledges. "And I haven't. That's kind of sad. Sometimes I think I'd like to do it again. But it's been so long, I probably wouldn't be any good anymore."

Thomas Hauser's new email address is thomashauserwriter@gmail.com. His most recent book – Protect Yourself at All Times – was published by the University of Arkansas Press. In 2004, the Boxing Writers Association of America honored Hauser with the Nat Fleischer Award for career excellence in boxing journalism.

ENTER THE OCTAGON

BY GARETH A DAVIES



BELLATOR BEATS UFC IN RACE TO STAGE MAJOR MMA EVENTS IN HAWAII

In December, Bellator, with its burgeoning global portfolio, held two events in Honolulu, Hawaii – the first time a leading MMA organization had taken cage-fighting to the Pacific islands since EliteXC a decade ago. It was not coincidental. Ilima-Lei Macfarlane, a native Hawaiian, became the first women's flyweight champion in North American MMA in 2017, and the unbeaten fighter was the perfect headliner.

There have been great Hawaiian fighters of course, from K.J. Noons to B.J. Penn to Max Holloway, who incidentally had been brilliant the previous week in his defense of the UFC featherweight title against Brian Ortega. The 27-year-old Holloway must rank as one of the most improved fighters in the sport, and – with two victories over Jose Aldo and a 13-fight winning streak – a contender for a place at the very top of the pound-for-pound list.

"The fight life is so fantastic," Macfarlane explained to me. Unbeaten going into the event in her homeland and known as "Ilimanator," she is a rich personality – not just a fighter but an academic; after attending Punahou High School in Honolulu (joining alumni Barack Obama and golf prodigy Michelle Wie), she finished college with a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology, followed by a master's degree in liberal arts and sciences. Even so, Macfarlane had lived and partied hard as a college student

Bellator women's flyweight champ Ilima-Lei Macfarlane brought the MMA organization to her native Hawaii.

before discovering her skills in the fight arts. Professional fighting ambushed her by chance only after a decision to get into the gym to get fit again. "I took it up and literally got the bug," she told me. She is now a blend of brain and brawn. And highly ambitious.

Bellator beat the UFC in the race to get to Hawaii. "I'm not going to compare us to other organizations, but we are here first, and it does feel good – regardless of any other organization," explained Bellator MMA CEO Scott Coker. UFC's Holloway, who was in Hawaii for the event, is now urging his fans to campaign for one of his fights to happen in his home state in 2019.

"Hashtag UFCHawaii," Holloway said. "It's all about you guys, the fans. So I'm going to break it down. Go on Instagram. Make a couple fake Instagrams. Listen. Keep listening. Tag your aunty. Tag your uncle. Tag your dog, your cat – people got bird Instagrams now. So everybody tag each other and let's get UFCHawaii rolling. Let's get into Aloha Stadium. Bring me home."

Coker, meanwhile, insisted that Bellator wants to "make this an annual event."

★ ★ ★

TITO ORTIZ FINALLY DEFEATS CHUCK LIDDELL IN TRILOGY FIGHT AT THE FORUM

It came at long last. Tito Ortiz finally got the victory over Chuck Liddell that he had waited 14 years for with a one-two against the cage wall late in the first round of Golden Boy Promotions' inaugural MMA main event at The Forum in Inglewood, California, late in November. There was heavy criticism from large swaths of the MMA media, with fans not having seen Liddell, once "The Man" in MMA, for eight years.

This was certainly a far cry from the fighter who once epitomized "sprawl and brawl" or, more to the point, the on-point brawler who knocked Ortiz out in 2004 and then again in 2006.

This time, Liddell, known as "The Iceman," was toyed with by Ortiz, who has continued to stay active as a fighter. "The whole game plan was never to do a takedown," said Ortiz, whose modus operandi was so often his wrestling base rather than his hands or feet. "I wanted to box Chuck. I wanted to test his skills."

The truth is – and Ortiz knows it – the skills have slowed with time. Both Ortiz and Liddell are already UFC Hall of Famers, beyond question two of the best light heavyweight fighters in the history of the sport, and their rivalry was the biggest news in the sport at one time. As for Liddell, he reasoned afterward that he made a mistake, got caught and had no excuses. Will Liddell fight again?

Well, he certainly did not rule it out ...

★ ★ ★

ONE CHAMPIONSHIP SIGNS WITH TURNER SPORTS

Along with reality television, MMA – like boxing – continues to grow as one of the hottest commodities for television and broadcast opportunities. Now Turner Sports has signed a three-year partnership with ONE Championship, a huge sports media company in Asia, to distribute its live event coverage in the United States. The streaming service will air 24 events scheduled in 2019. "ONE Championship is one of the most popular mixed martial arts organizations in the world, with a high concentration of passionate, millennial fans that make it a perfect fit for B/R Live and TNT," said Lenny Daniels, the President of Turner Sports, which launched B/R Live – a subscription-based live-streaming platform featuring broadcasts of several other sports – in March 2018.

Just as DAZN signed with Bellator and the UFC moved to ESPN and ESPN+, now Turner is getting in on the act.

The founder of ONE Championship, Chatri Sityodtong, a lifelong martial artist himself, believes his MMA organization's "simple formula of values, heroes, and stories" that has begun to resonate globally will be an antidote to the brash promotion of some of the sport's stars.

Chuck Liddell and Tito Ortiz settled their rivalry with a third bout, won by Ortiz.

Gareth A Davies is MMA Correspondent for The London Telegraph.

BEST I FACED

BY ANSON WAINWRIGHT

DWIGHT MUHAMMAD QAWI

Dwight Muhammad Qawi won world titles at light heavyweight and cruiserweight in the 1980s, facing many of the best fighters of his era along the way.

Qawi was born Dwight Braxton on January 5, 1953, in Baltimore, Maryland, and moved to Camden, New Jersey, as a youth. He soon found himself on the wrong side of the law.

"I got into some trouble; I went to reform school when I was 13, 14. I spent nine months there," Qawi told The Ring. "When I was 19, I made my mind up I was done with this, but by that time I had to do a little time. I did five years (for armed robbery) in prison."

The 1982 fight with Matthew Saad Muhammad in Philadelphia was Qawi's second look at what he says were the best skills he ever encountered.

Qawi was determined not to go back to prison, which introduced him to the sport, and joined a local boxing gym upon his release. He turned professional without any amateur experience in April 1978 and began his career with a draw. In mid-1981, he knocked out former 175-pound titlist Mike Rossman in seven rounds, then outpointed incarcerated contender James Scott in a title eliminator at Rahway State Prison, the same institution where Qawi had been imprisoned.

"I think some people would probably be intimidated," he said. "I was fearless. (Scott) called himself 'Superman,' and I said, 'You're nothing but a man.'"

In December 1981, Qawi met long-reigning Ring and WBC light heavyweight champion Matthew Saad Muhammad in Atlantic City. He started fast and took the fight to the teak-tough Saad Muhammad, stopping him in the 10th round. At 5-foot-7, Qawi became the shortest man in the division's history to win a title.

After the victory, he officially changed his name to Dwight Muhammad Qawi.

"I wanted to be universally recognized as Muslim, and I felt the name would help me do it," he explained. "I like this name Muhammad, which means 'praise,' and Qawi means 'the strong one.'"

He made three title defenses, including a repeat win over Saad Muhammad, before losing a hard-fought 15-round unanimous decision to Michael Spinks in a unification match.

After bouncing back with four wins, Qawi was offered the opportunity to go to South Africa to face Piet Crous for the WBA cruiserweight title. "The Camden Buzzsaw" stopped the local in the 11th round to win his second world title.

In July 1986, Qawi took his title to Atlanta and fought a rising star in unbeaten 1984 Olympic bronze medalist Evander Holyfield. The two contested what is widely considered the greatest cruiserweight fight in history, battling each other to a standstill over 15 frenetic rounds. Ultimately, Holyfield eked out a razor-thin split decision.

The two met in a rematch 17 months later, and by this time Holyfield had grown as a fighter. Qawi had started to fade and was stopped in four rounds. That was followed by a brief move to heavyweight, where he was stopped by George Foreman in seven rounds.

From the mid-to late-'80s, Qawi repeatedly battled an alcohol problem. "Last time I drank was April 30th, 1990. Sober since May 1, 1990. I knew I was done, I was defeated," he said solemnly.

Qawi fought on for several more years with mixed success, retiring for good in 1998 with a record of 41-11-1 (25 knockouts). He was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2004.

"That honor can never be taken away," he said proudly. "Every time I think about it, it means more than winning the title."

Qawi, now 66, is divorced and has two sons and two grandsons. He lives in Baltimore. Since 1992, he has worked a day job as a substance-abuse counselor.

He graciously took time to speak to The Ring about the best he fought in 10 key categories.

BEST JAB

Evander Holyfield: In a mediocre sense, Michael Spinks and Evander Holyfield – I didn't really get hit with that many jabs. It didn't do anything to me. Holyfield, he was real busy with the jab.

BEST DEFENSE

Eddie Davis: There was a guy I fought in Philadelphia; he was a journeyman (Al Bolden). You couldn't hit him. I made a cardinal sin in boxing; I had sex the night before. (laughs) That probably had something to do with it too. You couldn't hit him. Eddie Davis was so awkward – his movement. It took me a long time to figure out. We had a thing in boxing called 'putting them on the leash'; while he was in front of me, he was making me miss, but then I put him on the leash and made him follow me. That's when I got to him and knocked him out. Up until then, he had a helluva defense.

FASTEST HANDS

Holyfield: Both Michael Spinks' and Evander's hand speed were equally fast, but was not exceptional for me. I'd pick Evander.

BEST FOOTWORK

Holyfield: Piet Crous had good footwork; he moved pretty good, because he had me reaching a lot. He was taking three steps to my one. Holyfield and Michael Spinks did too. They moved a lot; they kept moving. Out of those three, Michael was so awkward I couldn't call that footwork. Crous was very consistent as a fighter, which gave him an advantage. Holyfield, he had perpetual motion; he kept moving, angles. I'd say Holyfield.

BEST CHIN

Holyfield: The best chin was Holyfield; he got a good chin. I hit him good in the first fight and the second fight. In the third round (of the rematch), I hit him with a right hand, and he stopped and woke back up and got away. Between rounds, his team jumped all over him, 'You got to get him out of there.' I heard them. He took a heck of a shot.

SMARTEST

Michael Spinks: Who would be smart getting in the ring with me? (laughs) Even though Spinks ran like a dog, he was smart for doing so. He was running so hard, he tripped over his own feet.

STRONGEST

Leon Spinks: He held his ground. He was a big guy. Holyfield was strong, but he didn't do anything to me; he pushed me not around, but off him. I think we all know that 'Big' George Foreman was strong and still is, but Leon Spinks drew me into a brawl with him, and he was very scrappy and tough.

BEST PUNCHER

Matthew Saad Muhammad: I think Holyfield was on some artificial enhancements that gave him an unfair advantage. So I'm not going to give him credit. Foreman didn't have the snap he used to have. He was thumping. He wasn't hurting me, because he wasn't in his heyday. I was hurting him; he was hurt quite a few times when he fought me. He wasn't the best puncher; I just ran out of gas. Matthew Saad Muhammad was legitimately the best puncher. He could hurt you – and he hurt me. The whole arena turned upside-down when he hit me.

BOXING SKILLS

Saad Muhammad: Saad Muhammad was a very skillful fighter; it's just I shut him down. He was very polished. He did nine title defenses and fought a lot of good opponents. My trainer said, 'He wants to slug with you. Trade punches.' But he showed some things in there. You always had to watch out for him. He would hit me with a left hook, uppercut – and he had a nice right hand.

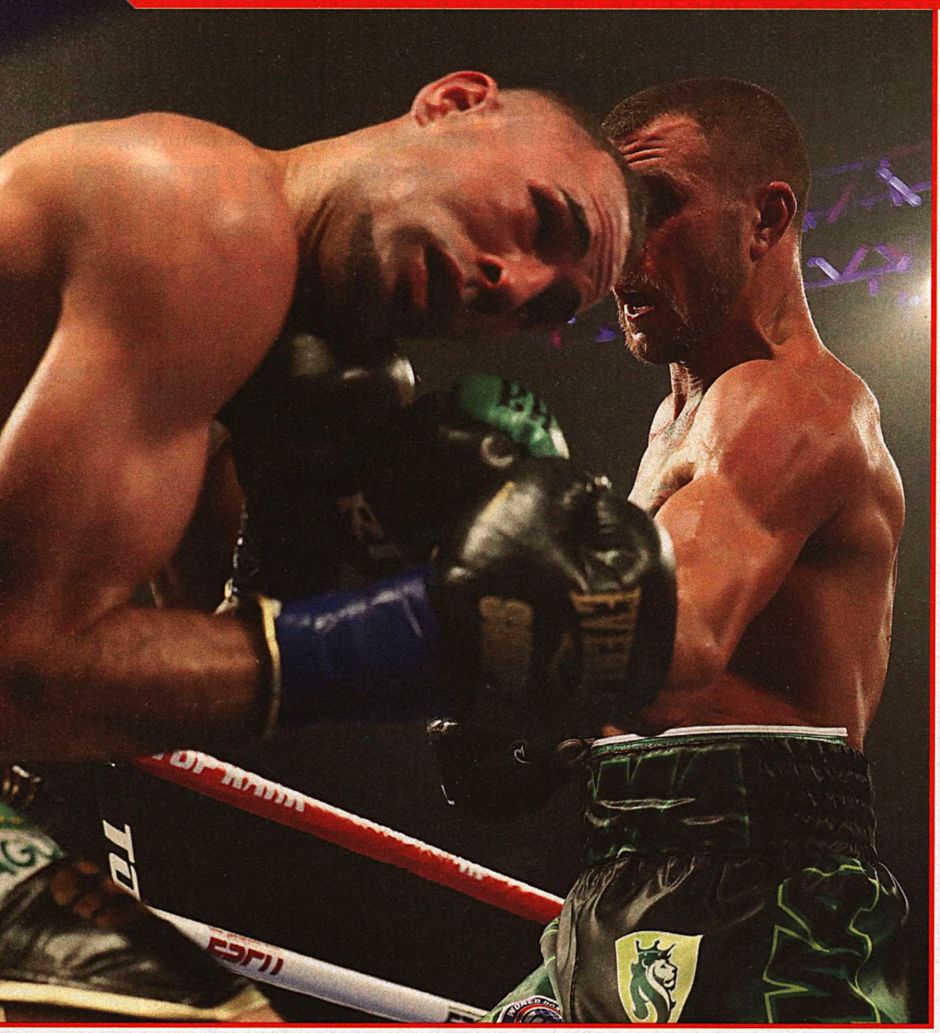
BEST OVERALL

Saad Muhammad: They all presented a challenge. Michael (Spinks), he would always be a challenge for me. I shared a ring with Foreman, but he was not in his heyday. My best overall fighter whom I faced was Matthew Saad Muhammad. He reminded me of Sugar Ray Robinson. He'd take whatever you did and turn it around and put it on you – and be better at it. (laughs) He could make adjustments; that's why he came back on so many people. I shut him down, I overwhelmed him. I could think of another, but I can't get around that asterisk that's in the way.

Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

RATINGS

POUND FOR POUND ★ RATINGS ANALYSIS ★ THE RING RATINGS



Vasiliy Lomachenko defended his Ring and WBA titles and added the WBO belt to his growing collection with a unanimous decision over the game Jose Pedraza on December 8.

POUND FOR POUND

1 **VASILIY LOMACHENKO**
Ukraine • 12-1-0 (9 KOs)

2 **TERENCE CRAWFORD**
U.S. • 34-0-0 (25 KOs)

3 **CANELO ALVAREZ**
Mexico • 50-1-2 (34 KOs)

4 **ALEKSANDR USYK**
Ukraine • 16-0-0 (12 KOs)

5 **GENNADY GOLOVKIN**
Kazakhstan • 38-1-1 (34 KOs)

6 **NAOYA INOUE**
Japan • 17-0-0 (15 KOs)

7 **MIKEY GARCIA**
U.S. • 39-0-0 (30 KOs)

8 **SRISAKET SOR RUNGVISAI**
Thailand • 47-4-1 (41 KOs)

9 **ERROL SPENCE JR.**
U.S. • 24-0-0 (21 KOs)

10 **DONNIE NIETES**
Philippines • 41-1-5 (23 KOs)

POUND FOR POUND: No change.

HEAVYWEIGHTS: Previously undefeated Bogdan Dinu (unrated) traveled from Romania to the plains of Kansas for the privilege of being knocked out in the fourth round by Jarrell Miller, who went from No. 9 to No. 8. "Big Baby" now says he's in the hunt for bigger names. Two of the biggest, Deontay Wilder and Tyson Fury, clashed with thrilling results – if you look past the whole "draw" thing. The Ring ratings panel did and went with the overwhelming opinion that Fury fought the better fight, lifting him from No. 7 to No. 2 ahead of Wilder, who dropped from No. 2 to No. 3.

CRUISERWEIGHTS: Constantin Bejenaru (No. 10) was removed for inactivity, and son of the world Arsen Goulamirian (born in Armenia, French by nationality, lives in the U.S.) brought his 24-0 record to the mix at No. 10.

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS: Former champion Adonis Stevenson (No. 3 last month) started well, but things ended very badly when he slowed down and was knocked out in the 10th round by Oleksandr Gvozdyk (No. 6 last month). Stevenson suffered a terrible brain injury and was reportedly still in intensive care at the time of publication, two weeks after the fight. Gvozdyk rose to No. 2 and Stevenson exited the ratings, leaving a space at No. 10 for Karo Murat.

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS: No change.

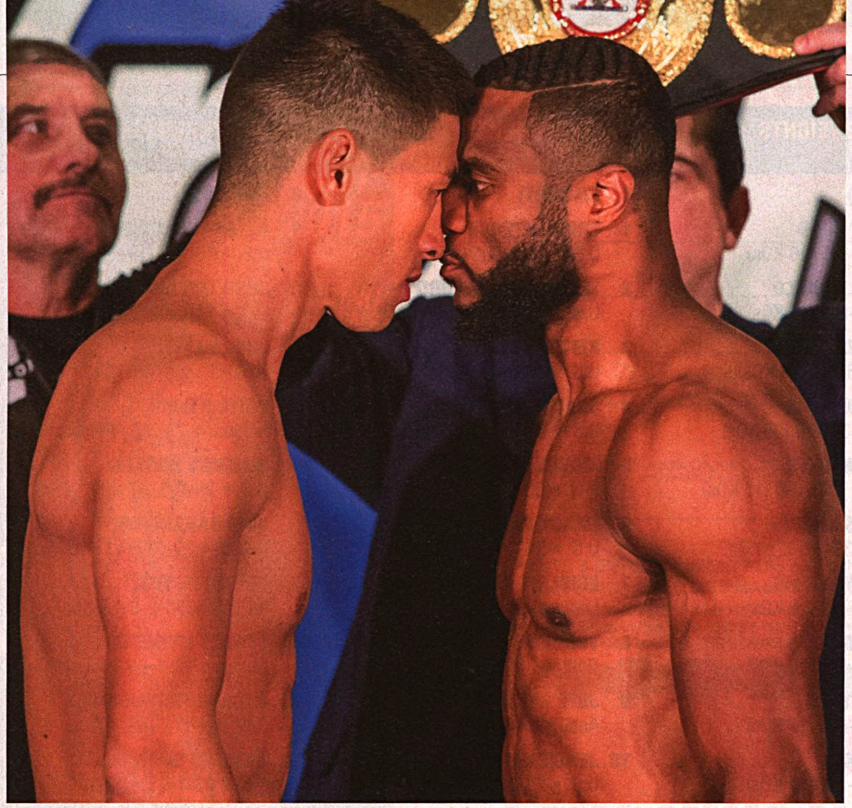
MIDDLEWEIGHTS: No change.

JUNIOR MIDDLEWEIGHTS: No change.

WELTERWEIGHTS: No change.

JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHTS: Maurice Hooker rose from No. 8 to No. 5 after showing some grit in picking himself up off the canvas to stop Alex Saucedo (unrated) in the seventh round.

LIGHTWEIGHTS: Jose Pedraza was relieved



Dmitry Bivol and Jean Pascal butt heads before their November 24 light heavyweight title bout in Atlantic City. (The fight, which Bivol won by lopsided decision, wasn't as intense as this staredown.)

of his WBO title by division champion Vasiliy Lomachenko but managed to survive a pair of 11th-round knockdowns and see the lopsided scorecards. The rangy Puerto Rican slipped from No. 3 to No. 6.

JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHTS: No. 8-ratèd Jezreel Corrales was removed for a year of inactivity after his knockout loss to Alberto Machado. That left room at No. 10 for undefeated American Lamont Roach Jr.

FEATHERWEIGHTS: No change.

JUNIOR FEATHERWEIGHTS: Isaac Dogboe (NEHO!) dropped from No. 1 to No. 5 after an upset unanimous-decision loss to Mexico's Emanuel Navarrete, who took Dogboe's WBO strap and rose from No. 9 to No. 3.

BANTAMWEIGHTS: Liborio Solis is fighting at 122 now, so he was removed and former junior bantamweight titleholder Carlos Cuadras came in at No. 10.

JUNIOR BANTAMWEIGHTS: No change.

FLYWEIGHTS: No change.

JUNIOR FLYWEIGHTS: Ganigan Lopez (No. 6 last month) moved up to flyweight, which left a vacancy at No. 10 to be filled by Japan's once-defeated Reiya Konishi, who graduated to 12-rounders in 2018 with a narrow loss to Carlos Canizales (No. 3).

STRAWWEIGHTS: Knockout CP Freshmart jumped into the No. 1 spot (from No. 2) after winning a unanimous decision over No. 3-rated Byron Rojas, who stayed put. Undefeated Californian Carlos Licona then went from unrated to No. 8 after winning the vacant IBF title with a split decision over Mark Anthony Barriga, who dropped out of the ratings from No. 10.

HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT UNLIMITED

C (VACANT)
1 ANTHONY JOSHUA
U.K. • 22-0-0 (21 KOs)
2 TYSON FURY
U.K. • 27-0-1 (19 KOs)
3 DEONTAY WILDER
U.S. • 40-0-1 (39 KOs)
4 LUIS ORTIZ
Cuba • 30-1-0 (26 KOs)
5 DILLIAN WHYTE
U.K. • 24-1-0 (17 KOs)
6 ALEXANDER POVETKIN
Russia • 34-2-0 (24 KOs)
7 JOSEPH PARKER
New Zealand • 24-2-0 (18 KOs)
8 JARRELL MILLER
U.S. • 23-0-1 (20 KOs)
9 ADAM KOWNACKI
U.S. • 18-0-0 (14 KOs)
10 KUBRAT PULEV
Bulgaria • 26-1-0 (13 KOs)

CRUISERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 200 LBS

C ALEKSANDR USYK
Ukraine • 16-0-0 (12 KOs)
1 MAIRIS BRIEDIS
Latvia • 25-1-0 (18 KOs)
2 MURAT GASSIEV
Russia • 26-1-0 (19 KOs)
3 YUNIER DORTICOS
Cuba • 23-1-0 (21 KOs)
4 KRZYSZTOF GLOWACKI
Poland • 31-1-0 (19 KOs)
5 DENIS LEBEDEV
Russia • 32-2-0 (23 KOs)
6 ANDREW TABITI
U.S. • 17-0-0 (13 KOs)
7 MAKSIM VLASOV
Russia • 42-3-0 (25 KOs)
8 KEVIN LERENA
S. Africa • 21-1-0 (9 KOs)
9 ILUNGA MAKABU
Congo • 24-2-0 (23 KOs)
10 ARSEN GOULAMIRIAN
France • 24-0-0 (16 KOs)

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 175 LBS

C (VACANT)
1 ELEIDER ALVAREZ
Colombia • 24-0-0 (12 KOs)
2 OLEKSANDR GVOZDYK
Ukraine • 16-0-0 (13 KOs)
3 DMITRY BIVOL
Russia • 15-0-0 (11 KOs)
4 BADOU JACK
Sweden • 22-1-3 (13 KOs)
5 SERGEY KOVALEV
Russia • 32-3-1 (28 KOs)
6 ARTUR BETERBIEV
Russia • 13-0-0 (13 KOs)
7 SULLIVAN BARRERA
Cuba • 22-2-0 (14 KOs)
9 MARCUS BROWNE
U.S. • 22-0-0 (16 KOs)
9 JOE SMITH JR.
U.S. • 24-2-0 (20 KOs)
10 KARO MURAT
Germany • 32-3-1 (21 KOs)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 LBS

C CALLUM SMITH
U.K. • 25-0-0 (18 KOs)
1 GILBERTO RAMIREZ
Mexico • 38-0-0 (25 KOs)
2 DAVID BENAVIDEZ
U.S. • 20-0-0 (17 KOs)
3 JOSE UZCATEGUI
Venezuela • 28-2-0 (23 KOs)
4 GEORGE GROVES
U.K. • 28-4-0 (20 KOs)
5 JAMES DEGALE
U.K. • 25-2-1 (15 KOs)
6 ANTHONY DIRRELL
U.S. • 32-1-1 (24 KOs)
7 CHRIS EUBANK JR.
U.K. • 27-2-0 (21 KOs)
8 CALEB TRUAX
U.S. • 30-4-2 (19 KOs)
9 ROCKY FIELDING
U.K. • 27-1-0 (15 KOs)
10 JESSE HART
U.S. • 25-1-0 (21 KOs)

RATINGS

Through fights of Dec. 9, 2018

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 LBS

- **C CANELO ALVAREZ** Mexico • 50-1-2 (34 KOs)
- **1 GENNADY GOLOVKIN** Kaz. • 38-1-1 (34 KOs)
- **2 DANIEL JACOBS** U.S. • 35-2-0 (29 KOs)
- **3 BILLY JOE SAUNDERS** U.K. • 26-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **4 ROB BRANT** U.S. • 24-1-0 (16 KOs)
- **5 DEMETRIUS ANDRADE** U.S. • 26-0-0 (16 KOs)
- **6 JERMALL CHARLO** U.S. • 27-0-0 (21 KOs)
- **7 SERGIY DEREVYANCHENKO** Ukraine • 12-1-0 (10 KOs)
- **8 DAVID LEMIEUX** Canada • 40-4-0 (34 KOs)
- **9 MACIEJ SULECKI** Poland • 27-1-0 (11 KOs)
- **10 KAMIL SZEREMETA** Poland • 18-0-0 (4 KOs)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 LBS

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 JARRETT HURD** U.S. • 23-0-0 (16 KOs)
- **2 JERMELL CHARLO** U.S. • 31-0-0 (15 KOs)
- **3 ERISLANDY LARA** Cuba • 25-3-2 (14 KOs)
- **4 JAIME MUNGUIA** Mexico • 31-0-0 (26 KOs)
- **5 BRIAN CASTANO** Argentina • 15-0-0 (11 KOs)
- **6 MICHEL SORO** France • 33-2-1 (22 KOs)
- **7 JULIAN WILLIAMS** U.S. • 26-1-1 (16 KOs)
- **8 KELL BROOK** U.K. • 38-2-0 (26 KOs)
- **9 AUSTIN TROUT** U.S. • 31-5-0 (17 KOs)
- **10 LIAM SMITH** U.K. • 26-2-1 (14 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 LBS

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 ERROL SPENCE** U.S. • 24-0-0 (21 KOs)
- **2 TERENCE CRAWFORD** U.S. • 34-0-0 (25 KOs)
- **3 KEITH THURMAN** U.S. • 28-0-0 (22 KOs)
- **4 SHAWN PORTER** U.S. • 29-2-1 (17 KOs)
- **5 MANNY PACQUIAO** Phil. • 60-7-2 (39 KOs)
- **6 DANNY GARCIA** U.S. • 34-2-0 (20 KOs)
- **7 EGIDIJUS KAVALIAUSKAS** Lithuania • 21-0-0 (17 KOs)
- **8 YORDENIS UGAS** Cuba • 23-3-0 (11 KOs)
- **9 JEFF HORN** Australia • 19-1-1 (13 KOs)
- **10 JESSIE VARGAS** U.S. • 28-2-2 (10 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 LBS

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 REGIS PROGRAIS** U.S. • 23-0-0 (19 KOs)
- **2 JOSH TAYLOR** U.K. • 14-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **3 JOSE RAMIREZ** U.S. • 23-0-0 (16 KOs)
- **4 KIRYL RELIKH** Belarus • 23-2-0 (19 KOs)
- **5 MAURICE HOOKER** U.S. • 25-0-3 (17 KOs)
- **6 IVAN BARANCHYK** Russia • 19-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **7 VIKTOR POSTOL** Ukraine • 30-2-0 (12 KOs)
- **8 SERGEY LIPINETS** Russia • 14-1-0 (10 KOs)
- **9 EDUARD TROYANOVSKY** Russia • 27-2-0 (24 KOs)
- **10 ANTONIO OROZCO** U.S. • 27-1-0 (17 KOs)

Jarrett Hurd stopped Jason Welborn in the fourth round of their 154-pound title bout on the Wilder-Fury undercard.

Kell Brook outpointed Michael Zerafa, but the former welterweight titleholder looked like a fading veteran.

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 LBS

- **C VASILIY LOMACHENKO** Ukraine • 12-1-0 (9 KOs)
- **1 MIKEY GARCIA** U.S. • 39-0-0 (30 KOs)
- **2 ROBERT EASTER** U.S. • 21-1-0 (14 KOs)
- **3 RICHARD COMMEY** Ghana • 27-2-0 (24 KOs)
- **4 ANTHONY CROLLA** U.K. • 34-6-3 (13 KOs)
- **5 LUKE CAMPBELL** U.K. • 19-2-0 (15 KOs)
- **6 JOSE PEDRAZA** P.R. • 25-2-0 (12 KOs)
- **7 RAYMUNDO BELTRAN** Mexico • 35-8-1 (21 KOs)
- **8 DEVIN HANEY** U.S. • 20-0-0 (13 KOs)
- **8 EMMANUEL TAGOE** Ghana • 29-1-0 (14 KOs)
- **10 FRANCESCO PATERA** Belgium • 20-3-0 (7 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 LBS

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 MIGUEL BERCHELT** Mexico • 35-1-0 (31 KOs)
- **2 GERVONTA DAVIS** U.S. • 20-0-0 (19 KOs)
- **3 TEVIN FARMER** U.S. • 27-4-1 (6 KOs)
- **4 ALBERTO MACHADO** P.R. • 21-0-0 (17 KOs)
- **5 FRANCISCO VARGAS** Mexico • 25-1-2 (18 KOs)
- **6 MASAYUKI ITO** Japan • 24-1-1 (12 KOs)
- **7 MIGUEL ROMAN** Mexico • 60-13-0 (47 KOs)
- **8 EDUARDO HERNANDEZ** Mexico • 27-0-0 (24 KOs)
- **9 SHAVKATDZHON RAKHIMOV** Russia • 13-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **10 LAMONT ROACH JR.** U.S. • 17-0-1 (7 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 LBS

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 LEO SANTA CRUZ** U.S. • 35-1-1 (19 KOs)
- **2 GARY RUSSELL JR.** U.S. • 29-1-0 (17 KOs)
- **3 CARL FRAMPTON** U.K. • 26-1-0 (15 KOs)
- **4 OSCAR VALDEZ** Mexico • 24-0-0 (19 KOs)
- **5 ABNER MARES** Mexico • 31-3-1 (15 KOs)
- **6 JOSH WARRINGTON** U.K. • 27-0-0 (6 KOs)
- **7 JOSEPH DIAZ JR.** U.S. • 27-1-0 (14 KOs)
- **8 LEE SELBY** U.K. • 26-2-0 (9 KOs)
- **9 SCOTT QUIGG** U.K. • 35-2-2 (26 KOs)
- **10 JESUS ROJAS** P.R. • 26-2-2 (19 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 LBS

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 GUILLERMO RIGONDEAUX** Cuba • 17-1-0 (11 KOs)
- **2 REY VARGAS** Mexico • 32-0-0 (22 KOs)
- **3 EMANUEL NAVARRETE** Mexico • 26-1-0 (22 KOs)
- **4 DANIEL ROMAN** U.S. • 26-2-1 (10 KOs)
- **5 ISAAC DOGBOE** Ghana • 20-1-0 (14 KOs)
- **6 JESSIE MAGDALENO** U.S. • 25-1-0 (18 KOs)
- **7 DIEGO DE LA HOYA** Mexico • 21-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **8 TJ DOHENY** Australia • 20-0-0 (14 KOs)
- **9 TOMOKI KAMEDA** Japan • 36-2-0 (20 KOs)
- **10 RYOSUKE IWASA** Japan • 25-3-0 (16 KOs)

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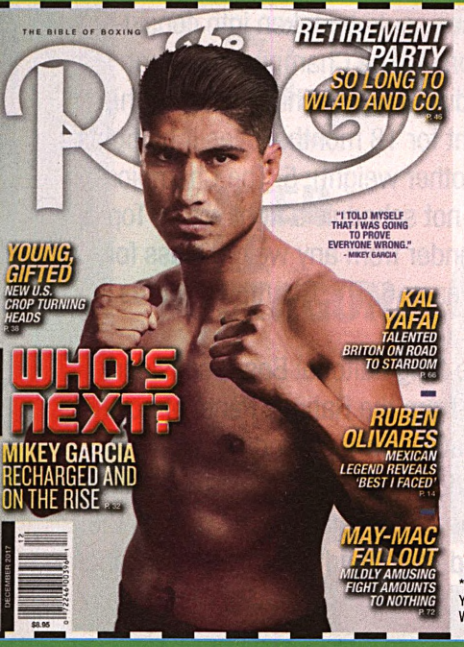

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RATINGS

Through fights of Dec. 9, 2018

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 LBS

C (VACANT)
1 NAOYA INOUE
Japan • 17-0-0 (15 KOs)
2 ZOLANI TETE
S. Africa • 28-3-0 (21 KOs)
3 EMMANUEL RODRIGUEZ
P.R. • 19-0-0 (12 KOs)
4 NONITO DONAIRE
Philippines • 39-5-0 (25 KOs)
5 RYAN BURNETT
U.K. • 19-1-0 (9 KOs)
6 LUIS NERY
Mexico • 28-0-0 (22 KOs)
7 JASON MOLONEY
Australia • 17-1-0 (14 KOs)
8 NORDINE OUBAALI
France • 14-0-0 (11 KOs)
9 TAKUMA INOUE
Japan • 12-0-0 (3 KOs)
10 CARLOS CUADRAS
Mexico • 37-3-1 (27 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 LBS

C SRISAKET SOR RUNGVISAI
Thailand • 47-4-1 (41 KOs)
1 JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA
Mexico • 38-3-0 (26 KOs)
2 KHALID YAFAI
U.K. • 25-0-0 (15 KOs)
3 KAZUTO IOKA
Japan • 23-1-0 (13 KOs)
4 JERWIN ANCAJAS
Phil. • 30-1-2 (20 KOs)
5 ROMAN GONZALEZ
Nicaragua • 47-2-0 (39 KOs)
6 ANDREW MOLONEY
Australia • 18-0-0 (11 KOs)
7 DONNIE NIETES
Philippines • 41-1-5 (23 KOs)
8 RAU'SHEE WARREN
U.S. • 16-2-0 (4 KOs)
9 ASTON PALICTE
Philippines • 24-2-1 (20 KOs)
10 MCWILLIAMS ARROYO
P.R. • 17-4-0 (14 KOs)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 LBS

C (VACANT)
1 MORUTI MTHALANE
S. Africa • 36-2-0 (24 KOs)
2 KOSEI TANAKA
Japan • 12-0-0 (7 KOs)
3 ARTEM DALAKIAN
Ukraine • 17-0-0 (12 KOs)
4 ANDREW SELBY
U.K. • 11-0-0 (6 KOs)
5 CRISTOFER ROSALES
Nicaragua • 28-3-0 (19 KOs)
6 SHO KIMURA
Japan • 17-2-2 (10 KOs)
7 MASAYUKI KURODA
Japan • 30-7-3 (16 KOs)
8 VINCENT LEGRAND
France • 28-0-0 (17 KOs)
9 WENFENG GE
China • 11-0-0 (6 KOs)
10 JUNTO NAKATANI
Japan • 17-0-0 (12 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 LBS

C HEKKIE BUDLER
S. Africa • 32-3-0 (10 KOs)
1 KEN SHIRO
Japan • 14-0-0 (8 KOs)
2 RYOICHI TAGUCHI
Japan • 27-3-2 (12 KOs)
3 CARLOS CANIZALES
Venezuela • 21-0-1 (17 KOs)
4 ANGEL ACOSTA
P.R. • 19-1-0 (19 KOs)
5 FELIX ALVARADO
Nicaragua • 34-2-0 (30 KOs)
6 HIROTO KYOGUCHI
Japan • 11-0-0 (8 KOs)
7 REY LORETO
Phil. • 24-14-0 (16 KOs)
8 MILAN MELINDO
Phil. • 37-4-0 (13 KOs)
9 EDWARD HENO
Phil. • 13-0-5 (5 KOs)
10 REIYA KONISHI
Japan • 17-1-0 (7 KOs)

Welterweight contender Jeff Horn (left) halted veteran Anthony Mundine in the opening round of their middleweight crossroads bout.

Maurice Hooker (right) retained his WBO 140-pound title for the first time with a rousing, up-from-the-canvas stoppage of then-unbeaten Alex Saucedo.

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 LBS

C (VACANT)
1 KNOCKOUT CP FRESHMART
Thailand • 19-0-0 (7 KOs)
2 WANHENG MENAYOTHIN
Thailand • 52-0-0 (18 KOs)
3 BYRON ROJAS
Nicaragua • 25-4-3 (11 KOs)
4 VIC SALUDAR
Philippines • 18-3-0 (10 KOs)
5 SIMPHIWE KHONCO
S. Africa • 19-5-0 (7 KOs)
6 JOSE ARGUMEDO
Mexico • 22-4-1 (13 KOs)
7 TSUBASA KOURA
Japan • 14-0-0 (9 KOs)
8 CARLOS LICONA
U.S. • 14-0-0 (2 KOs)
8 TATSUYA FUKUHARA
Japan • 21-6-6 (7 KOs)
9 DEEJAY KRIEL
S. Africa • 14-1-1 (6 KOs)

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RECORDS PROVIDED BY BOXREC.COM

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A champion can lose his belt in six situations: 1. The Champion loses a fight in the weight class in which he is champion; 2. The Champion moves to another weight class; 3. The Champion does not schedule a fight in any weight class for 18 months, although injuries and certain other unforeseen circumstances could be taken into consideration; 4. The Champion does not schedule a fight at his championship weight for 18 months (even if he fights at another weight); 5. The Champion does not schedule a fight with a Top-5 contender from any weight class for two years; 6. The Champion retires.

The Ring Editorial Board considers input from the Ratings Panel of boxing journalists from around the world and then decides collectively what changes will be made. That applies to both the pound-for-pound and divisional ratings.

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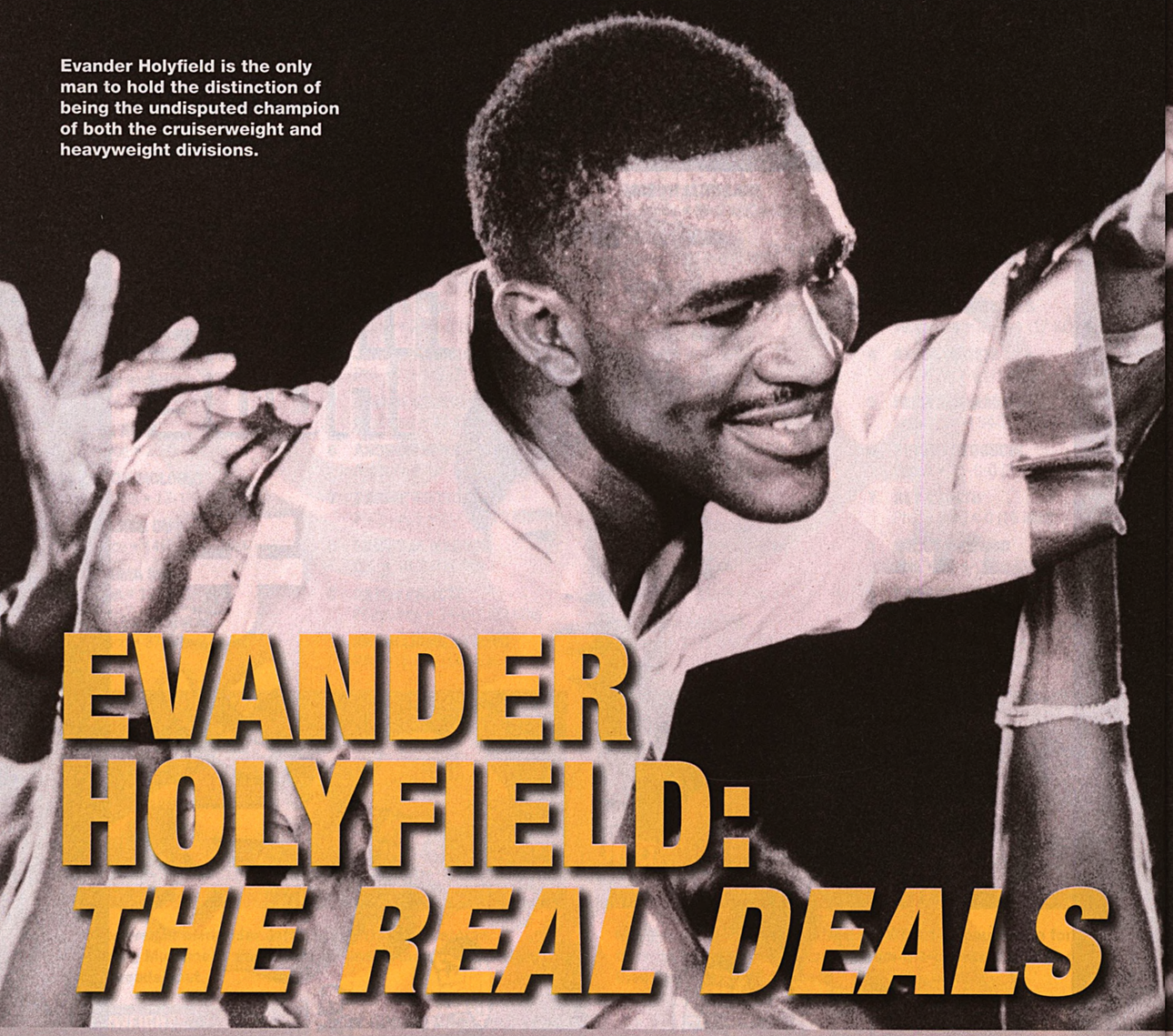


Evander Holyfield is the only man to hold the distinction of being the undisputed champion of both the cruiserweight and heavyweight divisions.

EVANDER HOLYFIELD: THE REAL DEALS

THE CELEBRATED FORMER CHAMPION REVISITS SIX OF THE FIGHTS THAT SHAPED HIS LEGACY

By **Tom Gray**

When using the word "warrior" in boxing parlance, you probably think of him more than any other fighter.

It was warrior spirit that took him to his greatest triumphs. It was warrior spirit that made him an idol to millions. It was warrior spirit that made him a sports legend. If there was a downside, it was that the same warrior spirit kept him in the ring long after he should have retired.

A former undisputed cruiserweight champion, a former undisputed heavyweight champion and the only four-time heavyweight titleholder in the history of the sport. Evander Holyfield is one of the greatest fighters who has ever lived.

Now, almost 20 years removed from his glory days, the ex-champion remains a beloved figure the world over and is still involved in boxing through Real Deal Promotions. But can anything replace the joy of combat? Doesn't he miss those electrifying fight nights that made the world stop?

"No, I don't," said Holyfield with a look that almost contradicted the answer. "I'm content. Actually, I wanted to clean the division up. I'd become the undisputed champion, but I wanted to end as undisputed champion so they could say I fixed it up right.

"Lennox Lewis got the decision (in the second fight), but because of that, I became the only four-time heavyweight champion of the world (by beating John Ruiz). Each generation takes things to another level. (Muhammad) Ali took it to another level, and I was able to do the same thing. I finally retired because I realized I'd already taken things to another level. That gave me peace."

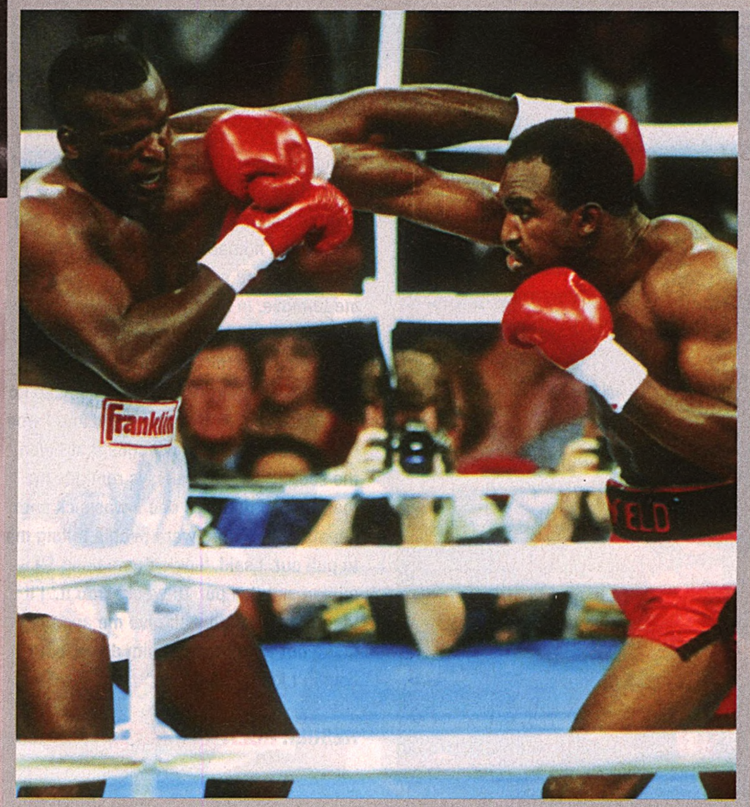
There are few fighters who competed at the same level as a prime Evander Holyfield. Here, the decorated Hall of Famer looks back on six of his most memorable encounters.

DWIGHT MUHAMMAD QAWI

July 12, 1986 / The Omni, Atlanta, Georgia
Titles: WBA cruiserweight

"That fight was so tough that even after I'd won, I thought I wasn't gonna fight anymore. I was about to quit, but my manager told me that I'd probably never fight a fight as tough as that again, and he was right. I have a lot of respect for (Qawi) because he was a two-time world champion. He was only 5-foot-7, but he kept coming. He wouldn't stop. I'd hit him with three or four punches, he'd hit me back with three or four punches. It was like a seesaw match. It went my way because I was younger, I had more energy and I was able to throw more. I'd only been eight (rounds in other fights), but my conditioning coach, Tim Hallmark, was legit; he was the best. He trained me in a way where I'd get my heart rate way up, then bring it back down quickly to recover. That made the difference in the fight."

RESULT: HOLYFIELD SD 15



BUSTER DOUGLAS

Oct. 25, 1990 / Mirage Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas
Titles: IBF, WBA and WBC heavyweight (undisputed)

"A lot of people looked at the size difference. People said, 'He knocked out (Mike) Tyson. I know he's gonna knock out Holyfield.' My thing was to say nothing and just let people destroy themselves with how they think. (Douglas) was also doing a lot of talking about what he was gonna do to me. But I knew I was quicker, better technically, and he was just bigger and stronger. If I fought his game, he could beat me, but if I fight my game, ain't no way in the world he's gonna beat me. The fight turned out to be one of my best performances. He telegraphed the uppercut (in round three), and I got him with the right hand and missed a left hook. He didn't get up and I was the heavyweight champion of the world. I got criticized and people would say, 'You beat a fat Buster Douglas.' Thing is, Buster Douglas fought around that weight (regularly)."

RESULT: HOLYFIELD KO 3

GEORGE FOREMAN

April 19, 1991 / Convention Center, Atlantic City
Titles: IBF, WBA and WBC heavyweight (undisputed)

"I didn't really want to fight George. I only wanted Tyson. But my manager, Shelly Finkel, said, 'Evander, this is about business.' I said, 'What do you mean? I'll make more money fighting Tyson.' He said, 'I want you to make $50 million rather than $30 million.' He said, 'There are people who believe George will knock you out. Fight George and you could make another $20 million (against Tyson).' I took the fight, and we broke all (financial) records. The thing is, George had his turn (as champion) but I hadn't had my turn. You may win (the title again), but not against me. I was able to beat him, but we both proved a point. There were people who felt there was no way in the world he could keep up (for 12 rounds), but he did. I hit him 23 times (in a row) and he just shook it off. I'm like, 'What do I do now?' He fought a good fight."

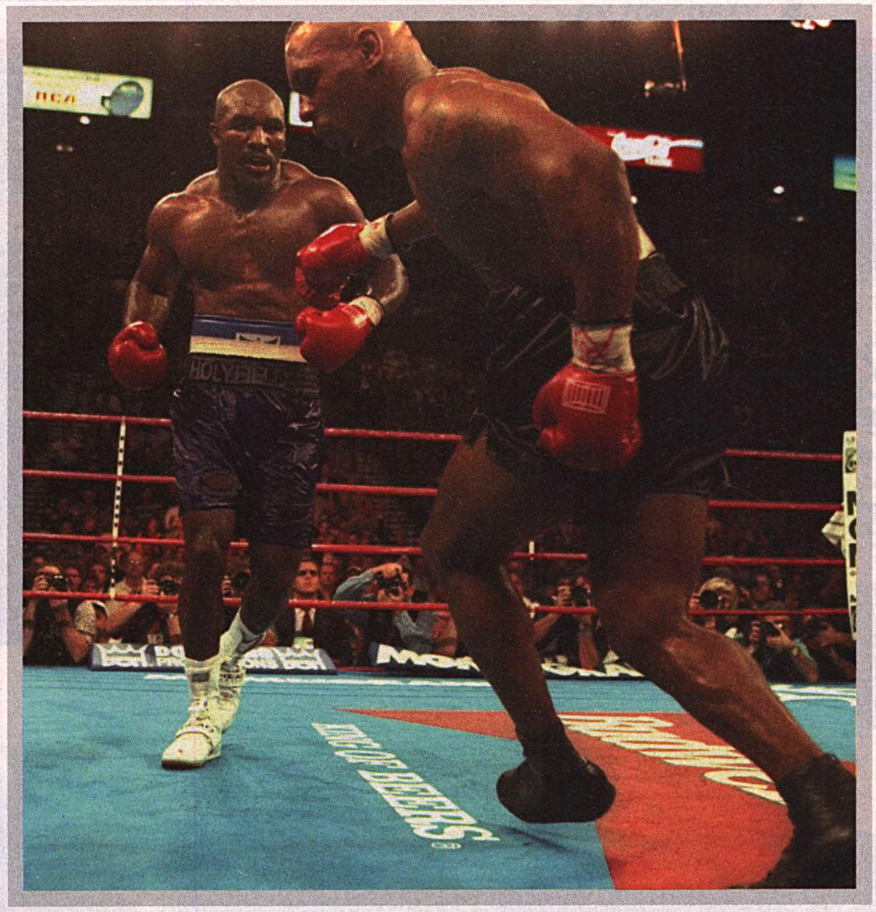
RESULT: HOLYFIELD UD 12

RIDDICK BOWE II

Nov. 6, 1993 / Caesars Palace, Las Vegas
Titles: IBF and WBA heavyweight

"I didn't follow (the game plan) in the first fight. It wasn't that I wanted a war, Bowe just got under my skin. He told me, 'If you don't run, I'll knock you out.' So I stood toe-to-toe, and my corner kept telling me to move. In the rematch, I followed directions. Emanuel Steward told me to move on Bowe for the first six rounds. He said, 'After the first six rounds, you can go toe-to-toe.' I did what I was told and I won the fight. Bowe acknowledges that I won the second fight but always reminds me that he won the third one. I was sick with hepatitis and there were people telling me to pull out. I said, 'Look, I'm making $9 million and I've put 10 weeks into it.' I'll take the medicine y'all give me and I'm going out to fight.' I got him down, but I couldn't keep him down."

RESULT: HOLYFIELD MD 12



MIKE TYSON I

Nov. 9, 1996 / MGM Grand, Las Vegas
Titles: WBA heavyweight

"Mike was a good fighter, probably the only guy where I watched just about every one of his fights. He was dangerous. When the fight was made, his team tried to make him mad, and they hoped I'd get scared. But I was accustomed to being hit and I knew Mike wasn't. I practiced hard and did what I was supposed to do. I brought in David Tua because he was perfect sparring. He was getting the best of me but, remember, I was sparring with three other guys (laughs) and he was last in. My nephew called me and said, '(Team Tua) are calling Shelly Finkel and saying they're getting the best of you.' I said, 'All right, just put him in (for sparring) today; we'll show him.' They put him in, and I stopped him. That one spar. All of a sudden, (Team Tua) called Shelly and said, 'Holyfield just bust him up!' (laughs) The whole thing in sparring is to practice what you need to do in a fight."

RESULT: HOLYFIELD TKO 11

MICHAEL MOORER II

Nov. 8, 1997 / Thomas & Mack Center, Las Vegas
Titles: IBF and WBA heavyweight

"In the first fight, I messed up my shoulder in the second round. The shoulder was actually messed up in the (second) Bowe fight, and I came back too quick. I should have healed up. I dropped Mike in the second round, then all of a sudden I couldn't use the shoulder. Mike kept (southpaw) jabbing over the top of it – wham, wham. He was a good counterpuncher, performed well and he got the decision. Come the second fight, he told me, 'If your shoulder was hurt, you would have said something.' But if I go in the ring and I know how I'm feeling, good or bad, then I'm not going to make excuses. I'm not like that. My whole thing is to be the very best I can be. Come the second fight, I dropped him five times, and he showed me how resilient he could be, because he kept getting up. He thought he could still do it, but they stopped the fight."

RESULT: HOLYFIELD TKO 8

FIGHTER OF THE YEAR

BY TOM GRAY

ALEKSANDR USYK

THE 90TH ANNUAL RING AWARDS

The legendary Evander Holyfield was named The Ring Magazine Fighter of the Year on three occasions, the first of which was in 1987.

"The Real Deal" began that year as the WBA cruiserweight titleholder after outpointing Dwight Muhammad Qawi in an epic 15-round battle. He closed out 1987 as the unified IBF and WBA champion with solid knockout wins over Henry Tillman, Ricky Parkey, Ossie Ocasio and Qawi in a rematch.

Such was Holyfield's dominance that he superseded Sugar Ray Leonard, who had sensationally dethroned middleweight king Marvelous Marvin Hagler, and Mike Tyson, who had unified the heavyweight division, for Fighter of the Year honors.

Holyfield would become undisputed champion in 1988 at the expense of WBC titleholder Carlos De Leon, and no cruiserweight has maintained that level of dominance since – until now.

Aleksandr Usyk began 2018 as the WBO titleholder, and by year's end the Ukrainian star was the undefeated, undisputed cruiserweight champion and one of the finest pound-for-pound fighters on the planet.

Usyk was so good that his status as Fighter of the Year for 2018 was all but decided halfway through the month of November. Here's why:

In January, Usyk ventured to Riga, Latvia, to face fellow unbeaten titleholder Mairis Briedis in the first semifinal of the World Boxing Super Series. A great fight was expected, and the action didn't disappoint. Briedis matched his opponent punch-for-punch, but Usyk closed better to claim a tight majority decision victory and the WBC belt.

Next up was an undisputed championship fight in the tournament

Aleksandr Usyk poses with the Muhammad Ali Trophy he earned by winning the inaugural WBSS tournament.

Usyk defended the undisputed cruiserweight championship with a chilling eighth-round TKO of the tough and crafty Tony Bellew.

final. The undefeated Murat Gassiev had cleared his half of the draw by besting Yuniel Dorticos in a cruiserweight classic, halting the Cuban danger man in a dramatic 12th round. Predictions varied on the outcome of the final, but Usyk was expected to be tested to the limit by his fierce rival.

It wasn't even close.

The pair collided at the Olympic Stadium in Moscow, and from the opening bell Usyk put on a clinic. A strong southpaw jab and rapid-fire flurries continually pierced the Russian's guard, and Gassiev couldn't set himself to let go with the concussive bombs that had felled Dorticos. Usyk moved off at angles and made his man fall short, or he pivoted brilliantly and caught Gassiev on the counter.

It was an exceptional performance worthy of an undisputed champion, and Usyk returned to Ukraine as the Ring, IBF, WBA, WBC and WBO titleholder. He was also crowned the inaugural World Boxing Super Series winner, becoming the first holder of the Muhammad Ali trophy.

No one would have blamed Usyk for taking a well-earned rest, but during his post-fight interview he had called out Tony Bellew, a hard-hitting former WBC titleholder from Liverpool, England. Bellew was coming off two upset wins over countryman David Haye at heavyweight, and it was going to take a special assignment to get him back into the ring.

The undisputed championship of the world was special.

With almost no rest, Usyk was

back in the gym preparing for yet another away mission. The Bellew bout was set for November 10 in Manchester, England, and the U.K. was gripped by big-fight fever. Bellew was known for rising to the occasion when the odds were against him, and he had whipped himself into the best condition of his career.

The challenger's hard work was certainly evident in the early going. Instead of implementing the expected aggressive approach, Bellew boxed brilliantly, drawing leads from Usyk and countering with sharp right hands.

Over time, however, Usyk began to solve the style, and by the midway point the tide had turned. Bellew was stunned in the sixth, worked over in the seventh, and a perfectly timed left hand produced a savage knockout in the eighth. Usyk's cruiserweight dominance had been rubber-stamped on the only true test left at 200 pounds.

"My year had been mentally and physically difficult, because the period between fights was too short and I never got to recover 100 percent," said Usyk at the post-fight press conference.

"After the Gassiev bout, I had only 30 days to recover. When I showed up in training camp (for the Bellew fight), I was lying in my bed looking at the ceiling, and suddenly a thought came to my mind: 'Jesus, what am I doing here?'"

And that is why we are in Usyk's debt. The intense physical preparation that this gifted 31-year-old boxer-puncher put himself through in 2018 resulted in history being made for the cruiserweight division, and fight fans were the beneficiaries.

No fighter has been more dominant this year. In just 15 fights, Usyk established himself as the undisputed champion and collected every one of his world title belts on enemy territory. That is an unbelievable achievement, and it's not hyperbole to suggest that the Ukrainian southpaw is already a lock for the International Boxing Hall of Fame after only five years as a professional.

RUNNERS-UP:

- **Canelo Alvarez:** He had it all to prove in his rematch with Gennady Golovkin, and prove it he did. The majority decision in his favor didn't suit everyone, but Alvarez took the fight to Golovkin and prevailed in a middleweight classic. The Mexican superstar then lifted the WBA "regular" super middleweight title with a three-round destruction of Rocky Fielding.
- **Naoya Inoue:** Blink and you would have missed him. "The Monster" moved up to bantamweight and crushed Jamie McDonnell in a single round to claim the WBA "regular" bantamweight title. Former titleholder Juan Carlos Payano suffered the same fate, succumbing to a brutal first-round knockout in a World Boxing Super Series quarterfinal. Absolutely devastating.
- **Vasiliy Lomachenko:** The 2017 Fighter of the Year got off the floor to wrench the Ring and WBA lightweight titles from the superb Jorge Linares via 11th-round stoppage. "Loma" then closed out the year by adding the WBO belt with a wide unanimous decision win over Jose Pedraza. He is currently rated as the No. 1 pound-for-pound fighter in the world.
- **Tyson Fury:** Two lethargic wins over hapless opponents following a 29-month hiatus were viewed as sideshows. However, a WBC heavyweight title fight against Deontay Wilder was serious business, and Fury responded with a performance for the ages. The former champion got off the floor twice, and, for the vast majority of onlookers, should have gotten the win instead of the split draw that was rendered.

After decimating the cruiserweight division in the 1980s, Holyfield (this month's guest editor) moved up to heavyweight in search of ultimate glory and found it, winning the championship a record-breaking four times. Usyk now follows, and his entry into the glamour division will unquestionably put the big men on notice. This latest cruiserweight champion has Holyfield's speed and ring savvy, and we'll soon know if he has his legendary heart and durability.

"I think he's gonna want to move into heavyweight, get his foot in the door and feel comfortable at that weight," said Matchroom promoter Eddie Hearn. "You have (the winner of) Dillian Whyte against Dereck Chisora, you have (Alexander) Povetkin, you have (Joseph) Parker, you have (Carlos) Takam, you have (Jarrell) Miller.

"(Team Usyk) will tell me the type of fights they want and we'll make them. If he's gonna come back to Britain, it's got to be a British heavyweight; it's got to be Whyte, it's got to be Chisora. If he wants to fight in America, (then it'll be someone else). There's all kinds of opportunities. My guess, not knowing the team's decision, is they'll want a strong fight at heavyweight, progress and ultimately challenge for the heavyweight title."

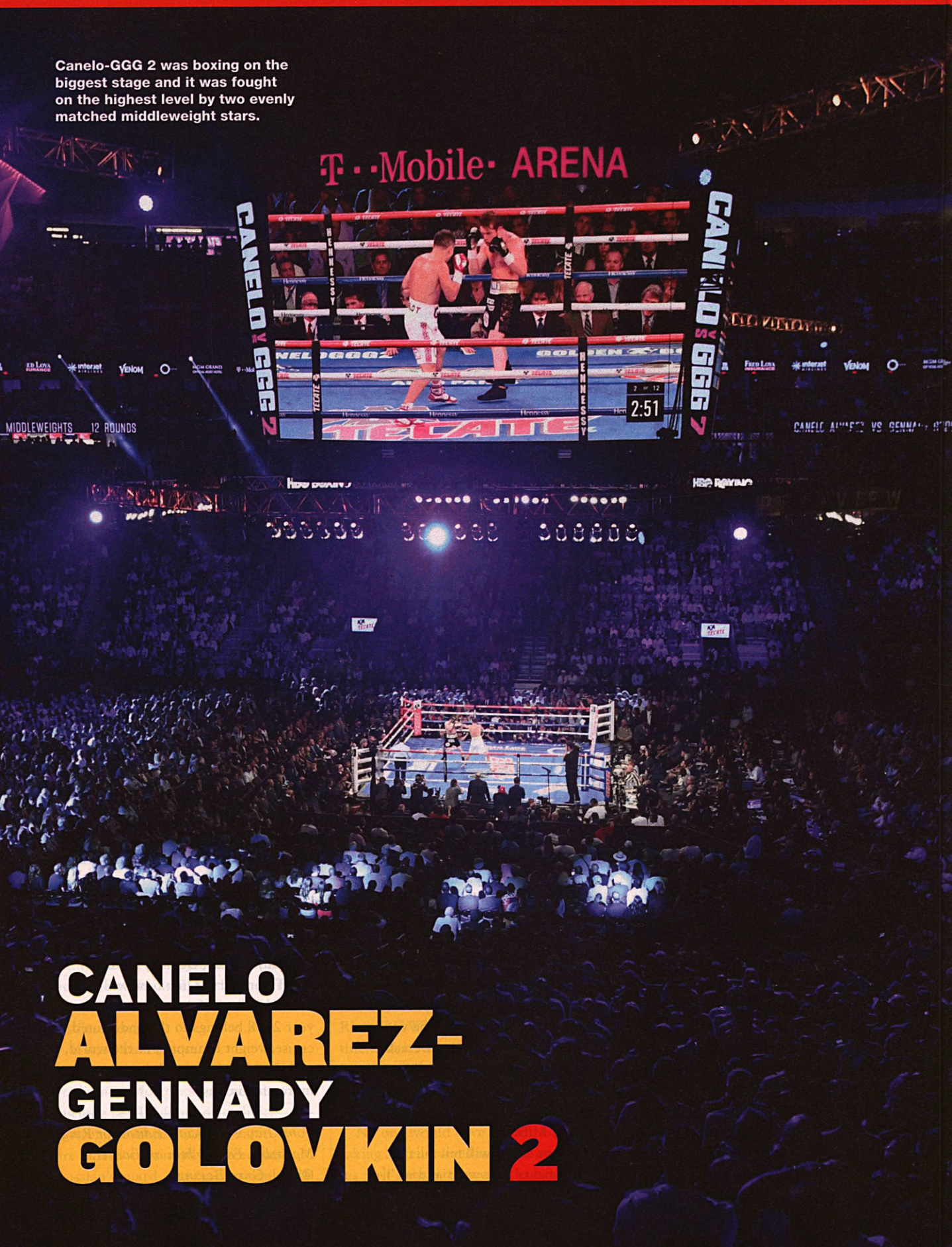
Can Usyk's incredible skills match the power and size of the big boys? Can he mix it with elite players like Anthony Joshua, Deontay Wilder and Tyson Fury? Only time will tell; all of the that is for the future. The year 2018 belongs to the undisputed cruiserweight champion of the world, and that decision could not be any more unanimous.★

Tom Gray is Associate Editor for Ring Magazine. Follow him on Twitter: @Tom_Gray_Boxing.

FIGHT OF THE YEAR

BY DOUG FISCHER

Canelo-GGG 2 was boxing on the biggest stage and it was fought on the highest level by two evenly matched middleweight stars.



CANELO ALVAREZ-GENNADY GOLOVKIN 2

The rematch between Canelo Alvarez and Gennady Golovkin was the highest-profile fight of 2018. But lost in the bad blood between the fighters and the fiercely divided public opinion on who won the September 15 showdown in Las Vegas was how excellent the fight was.

Alvarez and Golovkin – the two best middleweights in the game – delivered heated power-punch exchanges that fascinated the most uninitiated casual fan, as well as high-level technical craft to satisfy the snobbiest of boxing purists. The hotly contested championship bout, which Alvarez won by narrow majority decision, is arguably the most evenly matched clash of elite middleweights since the first fight between James Toney and Mike McCallum. That 1991 classic ended in a draw, as the first Canelo-Golovkin fight did (controversially). Canelo-GGG 2 could have legitimately been a draw. That's how well the middleweight rivals meshed.

It wasn't a blood-and-guts shootout like the Alex Saucedo-Lenny Zappavigna tear-up, and it didn't feature dramatic final-round knockdowns, stoppages or rallies as Jarrett Hurd-Erislandy Lara, Murat Gassiev-Yunier Dorticos and Srisaket Sor Rungvisai-Juan Francisco Estrada featured, but it treated fans to elite-level mid-range boxing and infighting.

There were no clinches or rough stuff, because Alvarez and Golovkin know their craft too well to need foul play and stalling tactics. And the absence of knockdowns wasn't for a lack of effort from either middleweight champ. Golovkin and Alvarez own world-class chins, but they also possess subtle defensive prowess – punch-slipping and blocking ability – which they employed without detracting from their offense.

Each neutralized their rival's strengths in a way that still made for an intense, engrossing and entertaining contest of will and skill. Golovkin was more relaxed in the early rounds than he had been during bout No. 1 (his first big-time PPV event in Las Vegas), but Alvarez was more confident than he was one year earlier. The Mexican star found an answer to Golovkin's vaunted pressure by standing his ground and attacking the Kazakhstani hero's body. Golovkin adapted to Alvarez's deadly accurate power punches by circling and outworking the younger man. Alvarez still found his mark thanks to a faster jab, but GGG's educated left stick was busier and more varied.

Golovkin landed his right cross and uppercut to head-swiveling effect, often aiming for the nasty cut above Alvarez's left eye. Alvarez punished GGG's rib cage, sternum and cheekbone with left hooks. Alvarez did his best to walk down the veteran who was once boxing's most feared man. Golovkin, probably slightly past his athletic prime at age 36, gave his all to dissuade the 27-year-old bull by taking on the unexpected role of the matador.

The result was a test of mettle for two fighters who may well wind up in the International Boxing Hall of Fame in the not-too-distant future.

By the middle of the fight, Golovkin was breathing hard between rounds as his trainer, Abel Sanchez, voiced instructions with a slight tone of distress. However, the sport's longest-reigning titleholder was not about to fade. Golovkin put forth a work rate that puts men 10 years younger to shame, lowering the tiring Alvarez's punch output down the stretch, though not the Mexican's aggression.

Team GGG dared Team Canelo for a full year to fight "Mexican style," and Alvarez – to the surprise of some fans and pundits – willingly obliged.

Alvarez tried to rally at the start of Round 10, opening himself up for a stunning straight right that landed at the midway point and would have laid most middleweights out. Alvarez, likely buzzed, defiantly dropped his hands and avoided most of GGG's follow-ups. He even did his best to regain his momentum at the round's end but missed with most of his retaliatory punches. Between rounds, the Guadalajara native's trainer, Eddy Reynoso, composed and focused throughout the night, told his fighter to give up trying to knock Golovkin out.

It was the only instruction Alvarez ignored. He dug deep and got the worst of the exchanges in Round 11. Alvarez entered Round 12 with a bloody nose and an angry gash over his left eye. Golovkin entered the final three minutes with swelling around both eyes, and he suffered a cut over his right eye during the round. Both emptied their tanks to end a contest that was as technically clean as it was physically grueling.

Golovkin had the edge in total punches (232 to 202) and jabs (118 to 59) landed, according to CompuBox stats. However, Alvarez connected on more power shots (143-116).

So, who was the real ring general? It depends on what you like and *who* you like. The diehard fans of each middleweight will always be divided. The respect the rivals showed each other throughout the rematch was quickly forgotten amid the social-media animosity between their supporters, which lasted for weeks.

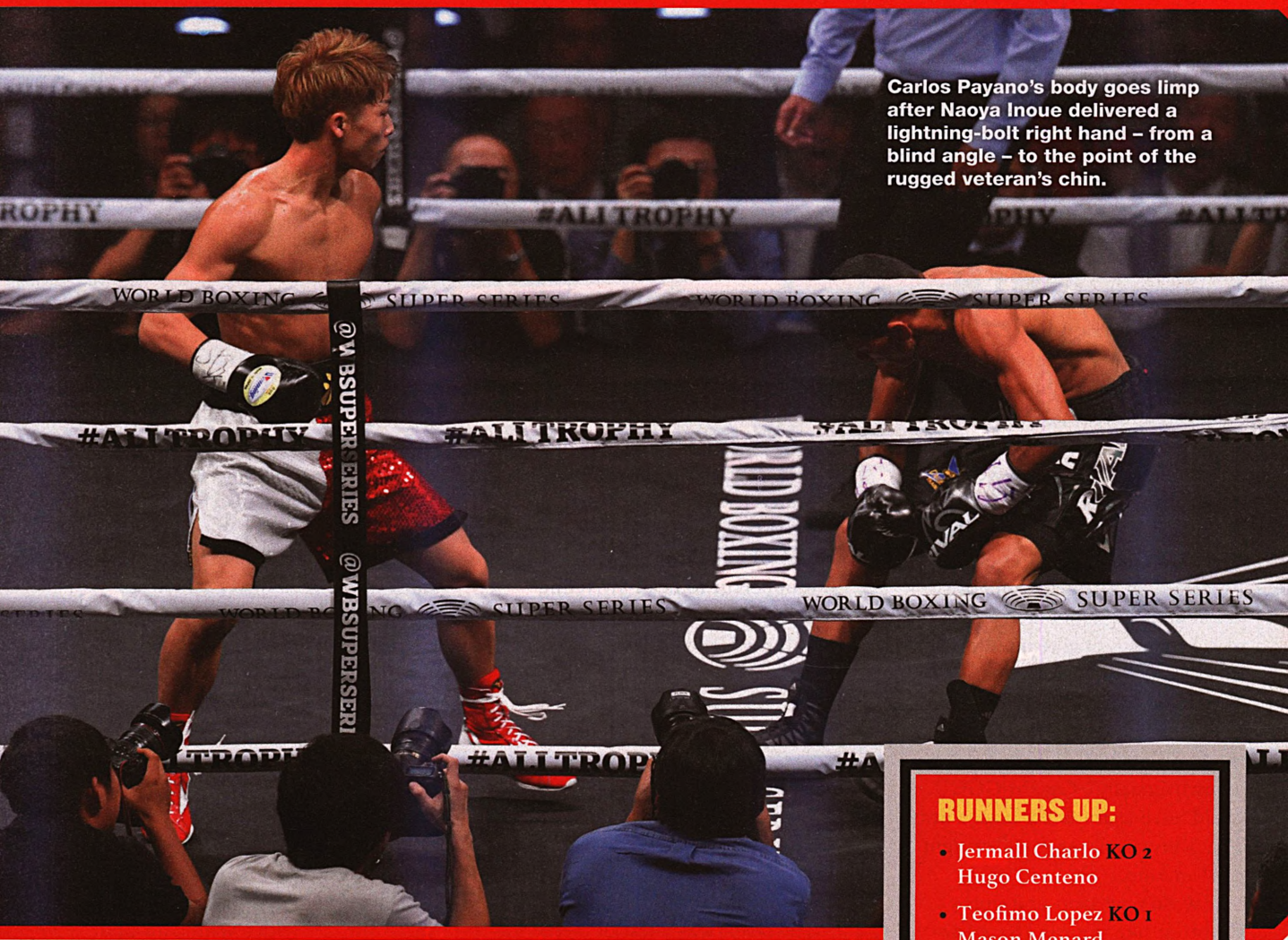
As time goes on, however, true fans of the sport will look back on Canelo-GGG 2 and appreciate what a special fight they delivered. ★

RUNNERS UP:

- Alex Saucedo-Lenny Zappavigna
- Jarrett Hurd-Erislandy Lara
- Murat Gassiev-Yunier Dorticos
- Srisaket Sor Rungvisai-Juan Francisco Estrada

KNOCKOUT OF THE YEAR

BY MICHAEL MONTERO



Carlos Payano's body goes limp after Naoya Inoue delivered a lightning-bolt right hand – from a blind angle – to the point of the rugged veteran's chin.

RUNNERS UP:

- Jermall Charlo KO 2 Hugo Centeno
- Teofimo Lopez KO 1 Mason Menard
- Aleksandr Usyk TKO 8 Tony Bellew
- Dillian Whyte KO 6 Lucas Browne

NAOYA INOUE KO 1 JUAN CARLOS PAYANO

Just one minute into their bantamweight bout, Naoya Inoue lived up to his "Monster" moniker when he flattened Juan Carlos Payano with a devastating one-two combo that landed right on the button. It was the second first-round KO of the year for the Japanese star. In May, the former 108- and 115-pound titleholder scored a 112-second stoppage against Jamie McDonnell to announce his arrival to the bantamweight division. Neither McDonnell nor Payano had ever been stopped before.

Even though he has continued to move up in weight since turning pro six years ago, Inoue has carried his power with him, scoring 15 stoppages in his 17 bouts. He is the favorite to win the World Boxing Super Series tournament, slated to face Emmanuel Rodriguez in the semifinals at a date and venue to be determined early next year. If successful, Inoue will capture the unbeaten Puerto Rican's IBF belt (adding it to the secondary WBA title he lifted from McDonnell). Can he keep his seven-fight knockout streak going against the undefeated Rodriguez?

After only two rounds of work this year, Inoue will likely spend more time "at the office" in 2019 as he faces the best fighters in his division. But just to play it safe, fans should never blink any time they watch the "Monster" and his 88 percent knockout ratio climb into the ring.★

TRAINER OF THE YEAR

BY MICHAEL MONTERO

Anatoly Lomachenko has quietly overseen the professional development of his son, Vasiliy, and Aleksandr Usyk to multiple world titles and pound-for-pound prominence.

RUNNERS UP:

- Ben Davison
- Robert Garcia
- Shingo Inoue
- Eddy Reynoso

ANATOLY LOMACHENKO

Anatoly Lomachenko trains his son, Vasiliy – the best fighter in the world, pound for pound – and undisputed cruiserweight champion Aleksandr Usyk. In 2018, the former coach of the Ukrainian amateur boxing team led his star pupils to a record of 5-0.

Usyk is the very definition of a world champion, as Anatoly guided the 6-foot-3 southpaw to three wins on the road last year. Usyk won the inaugural World Boxing Super Series tournament with decision victories over Mairis Briedis in Latvia and Murat Gassiev in Russia, handing both men their first professional loss. He then stamped his claim on Fighter of the Year honors by stopping Tony Bellew in the U.K. That victory set up big future business, as Usyk plans an eventual move to heavyweight and a possible showdown against the U.K.'s biggest sports star, Anthony Joshua.

Meanwhile, Vasiliy Lomachenko became the quickest three-division titlist in boxing history with his knockout of Jorge Linares in May, then unified lightweight titles with a dominant decision win over Jose Pedraza in December. Both fights were in New York, where the footwork and angles specialist continues to build his brand. Vasiliy suffered a torn labrum in his right shoulder against Linares, making his stoppage of the much bigger Venezuelan that much more impressive.

Perhaps most impressive of all, Anatoly's son has shown improvement as a fighter after a controversial split decision loss to Orlando Salido in only his second pro fight. That sort of thing is rare in a fighter with such an extensive amateur career that spanned nearly a decade and included almost 400 bouts. ★

ROUND OF THE YEAR

BY RYAN SONGALIA

DEONTAY WILDER VS. TYSON FURY ROUND 12

The fight was over at this point. Most referees would have stopped counting and waved it off. Deontay Wilder, trailing for much of the fight, finally found the shot that could erase everything that had preceded it, connecting cleanly

Round 12 of Wilder-Fury delivered a level of drama and excitement not seen in the final round of heavyweight title fight since Ali-Frazier I and Holmes-Norton.

on the side of Tyson Fury's head with a right hand and following it up with a left hook. Fury's head bounced off the canvas violently and he lay motionless until Jack Reiss' count reached six. Wilder had been dancing and blowing kisses to the crowd at Staples Center from the moment Fury went down, but as the Englishman started to rise, Wilder's face betrayed how serious the situation was. The fight was far from over.

"I've got a good fighting spirit and I never say die," said Fury, who remains the lineal heavyweight champion.

The knockdown turned a cautiously anticipated heavyweight title fight into an unforgettable night. To the delight of the screaming fans who came over from the U.K., Fury not only got up; he started backing up Wilder and stunned him with a right hand-left hook combination. By the end of the fight, it was Wilder who looked like he needed the final bell.

The knockdown ranks alongside those from Larry Holmes-Earnie Shavers II and Joe Frazier-Muhammad Ali I as the most brutal ones survived in a heavyweight championship fight. It was this knockdown that salvaged a draw, allowing Wilder to retain the WBC belt.

"I literally seen this man's eyes roll in the back of his head. When I seen Jack on the ground with him checking him, I'm like, 'It's over.' Only God knows how he got back up," said Wilder.

Ignore the complaints of a "long count" and the poor 115-111 scorecard for Wilder; the 12th round is what fans for decades will ask Wilder and Fury about when they ask the two for autographs.

If the hope was for each man to have something to lord over Anthony Joshua, the 12th round sent the message that all the drama of boxing's biggest weight class was in this rivalry. Regardless of how you scored the fight, it's clear that heavyweight boxing is back in a big way. Even the most cynical of boxing hipsters will be looking forward to the rematch. ★

RUNNERS UP:

- Alex Saucedo vs. Leonardo Zappavigna, Round 4
- Srisaket Sor Rungvisai vs. Juan Francisco Estrada, Round 12
- Murat Gassiev vs. Yunier Dorticos, Round 12
- Sho Kimura vs. Kosei Tanaka, Round 2

UPSET OF THE YEAR

BY RYAN SONGALIA

KAZUHIRO NOGI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

CRISTOFER ROSALES TKO 9 DAIGO HIGA

At a time when Japanese boxing was enjoying a renaissance, Daigo Higa looked to be among the most exciting of the bunch. He had marched unbeaten to the WBC flyweight title, never once going to the scorecards in 15 previous

Cristofer Rosales was brought to Japan as a sacrificial lamb for popular flyweight titleholder Daigo Higa, but the talented Nicaraguan flipped the script.

fights. A swarming power-puncher whose body shots didn't just weaken opponents but knocked them out, Higa had quickly become one of Japan's biggest boxing stars and must-see programming for hardcore boxing fans. There was even talk of him gatecrashing the "Superfly" series after he showed up in Los Angeles and trained at the Wild Card Boxing Club. Few had any inkling of what was to come in his third title defense.

Cristofer Rosales' record gave no indication that he was anything more than a tough fringe contender, having fought mostly in Nicaragua and losing when he stepped up against Andrew Selby and Kal Yafai in 2017 and 2015, respectively, when he left his home country. What wasn't as clear on paper is how much bigger Rosales would appear once the bell rang. Despite Higa missing weight by two pounds, Rosales pushed the Japanese fighter back and traded with him punch for punch.

Uppercuts met Higa whenever he leaned in, and left hooks beat him to the punch when he and Rosales mixed it up on the inside. Rosales began pushing the 22-year-old favorite to the ropes as early as Round 3, but Higa wasn't going to give up his undefeated record without a struggle, firing back with heavy bombs that did little to dissuade the Nicaraguan. By Round 6, Higa's head had become a punching bag, and after the eighth he went to the wrong corner, dazed and deflated. The fight could have continued, but it was clear to Higa's team that their man had nothing left. They stopped the fight midway through the ninth, awarding Rosales a hard-fought victory and the world title.

Rosales, 24, has proven not to be a one-hit wonder, knocking out Paddy Barnes in the three-time Olympian's native Belfast with a sizzling right uppercut to the body in his first defense, while Higa has yet to return to the ring. Higa-Rosales didn't shake up the world the way a celebrated heavyweight upset in Japan did 28 years earlier, but it certainly has rearranged the flyweight title picture. ★

RUNNERS UP:

- Josh Warrington UD 12
  Lee Selby
- Maurice Hooker SD 12
  Terry Flanagan
- Eleider Alvarez KO 7
  Sergey Kovalev
- Rob Brant UD 12
  Ryota Murata

After stopping Higa, who had won all 15 of his bouts by KO, Rosales defended the WBC belt by stopping another hometown hero, Paddy Barnes, in Belfast.

COMEBACK OF THE YEAR

BY TOM GRAY

Tyson Fury had to come back from addiction and mental illness before shocking the boxing world by holding heavily favored Deontay Wilder to a draw.

TYSON FURY

A sensational upset win over long-reigning heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko in November 2015 saw Tyson Fury reach the top of the heavyweight mountain, but his rapid physical and mental decline took him from the sports pages to the front pages.

At his worst, the enigmatic Englishman was severely depressed, reliant on alcohol and drugs and approximately 140 pounds overweight.

The revelation that Fury had also tested positive for the banned substance nandrolone following a victory over Christian Hammer in February 2015 looked like the final nail in the coffin. However, a backdated two-year ban from UK Anti-Doping meant that Fury was free to apply for a boxing license and the comeback was on.

Low-key victories over former cruiserweight Sefer Seferi and the unheralded Francesco Pianeta proved little, and critics scoffed when Fury signed on to face unbeaten power-

RUNNERS-UP:

- **Nonito Donaire:** After losing to featherweight Carl Frampton in April, Donaire returned to bantamweight for the first time in seven years. "The Filipino Flash" held his own against Ryan Burnett and claimed the WBA title when the incumbent was forced to pull out with a back injury.
- **Kazuto Ioka:** Three-weight world titleholder Ioka shocked the boxing world by retiring from the sport at age 28. His fires rekindled, he returned from 17 months of inactivity to outpoint the highly capable McWilliams Arroyo at 115 pounds. Ioka was scheduled to vie for his fourth divisional title against pound-for-pound entrant Donnie Nietes on New Year's Eve.
- **Manny Pacquiao:** A loss to Jeff Horn in July 2017 looked like the end of the road for one of the greatest fighters of his generation. However, a homecoming bout in the Philippines brought out the best in Pacquiao, who stopped Lucas Matthysse in nine to claim the WBA "regular" welterweight title.
- **Cristofer Rosales:** A one-sided defeat to Welshman Andrew Selby in May 2017 seemed to solidify Rosales as a notch below world level at flyweight. He returned with three victories before being granted a world title fight against the fearsome Daigo Higa. Rosales fought brilliantly and claimed the WBC title by ninth-round stoppage.

puncher Deontay Wilder for the WBC heavyweight title in December.

He'd been too inactive. His past would catch up with him. There was no way he could go rounds against a dominant heavyweight titleholder.

Wrong, wrong and wrong.

At Staples Center in Los Angeles, the unbeaten Fury, still regarded as the lineal champion, displayed tactical superiority through eight rounds, befuddling Wilder with feints, angles and a sharp left hand.

The defending beltholder finally broke through in the ninth, scoring a knockdown, but Fury fought back bravely to regain control of the bout. However, another devastating right hand-left hook from Wilder in the final round appeared to be terminal.

Fury lay on his back, motionless, and then, in what has become a metaphor for one of the greatest boxing comebacks in decades, the 30-year-old ex-champion rose from the ashes. Not only did Fury survive, he took the fight to Wilder for the remainder of a thrilling session.

The official verdict was a split-decision draw, but the overwhelming opinion is that Fury did more than enough to lift the title.

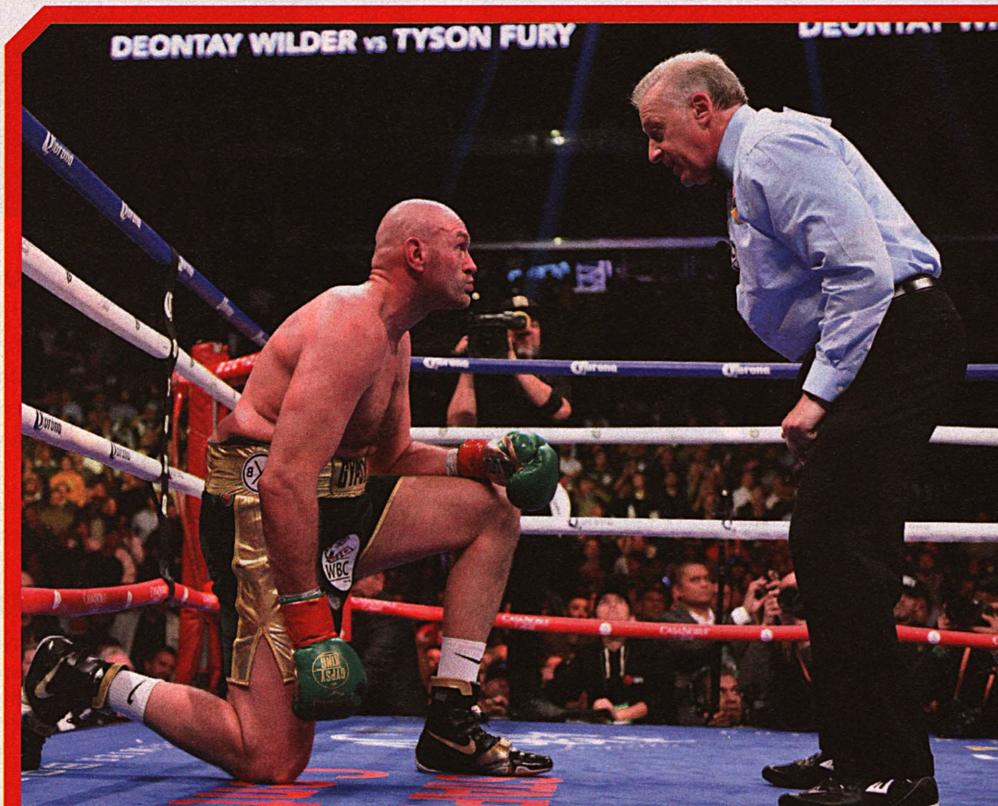
The result, however, has become almost redundant. Fury has been the object of ridicule for a period of years but turned all of that around, winning over some of his harshest critics with one amazing performance.

His greatest victory, however, has been raising awareness for mental health conditions. Despite the obvious disappointment of not regaining the heavyweight title and the controversy surrounding the result, Fury displayed true sportsmanship by accepting the decision with grace.

"If I can get up, so can you!"

These were words that will inspire, and they were uttered by a real fighting man who proved himself once more on the biggest stage while helping people along the way. Expect a Wilder rematch in 2019. ★

Fury's mettle and character will never again be questioned after he got up from the chilling final-round knockdown against Wilder.



PROSPECT OF THE YEAR

BY ANSON WAINWRIGHT

TEOFIMO LOPEZ

Undefeated lightweight

Teofimo Lopez won all four of his fights this year against steadily improving opposition, ending the year with a bang despite recent hand surgery.

Abundantly clear from Lopez's banner 2018 is that the aggressive boxer-puncher possesses an

Teofimo Lopez has a flair for showmanship that matches his undeniable boxing and athletic talent.

AL BELLO

intoxicating blend of speed, skills and athleticism – along with an engaging personality – that has already made him a fan favorite.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Lopez's family moved south to Davie, Florida, when he was 6 years old. It was at that young age when he first became interested in boxing, and his father and future coach, Teofimo Sr., encouraged his fascination. Lopez compiled a record of 150-20 during a stellar amateur career that included six national titles.

When Lopez was unable to represent his birth country at the 2016 Rio Olympics, his father was resourceful and dusted off the family tree to allow his son to instead fight for their country of heritage, Honduras. After qualifying, he lost in the opening round of the Games.

He made his professional debut under the Top Rank promotional banner in November 2016 and has moved seamlessly since.

RUNNERS UP:

- Murodjon Akhmadaliev
- Joshua Buatsi
- Jaron Ennis
- Filip Hrgovic

The 21-year-old kicked off the year with a workmanlike six-round decision over trial horse Juan Pablo Sanchez in February.

He returned in May with a 64-second bludgeoning of once-beaten Vitor Jones on the undercard of Jorge Linares-Vasiliy Lomachenko.

In July, Lopez caught the eye of many with a strong performance in New Orleans, stopping William Perez in six rounds to steal the limelight from local hero Regis Prograis. Unfortunately, Lopez injured his right hand against Perez and needed surgery, so it looked like he would lose some momentum.

However, in his December comeback, he was as clinical – and formidable – as ever, knocking former contender Mason Menard out cold in 44 seconds to claim the vacant NABF strap. Lopez came out aggressively and landed a picture-perfect right hand, drilling Menard for a highlight-reel KO.

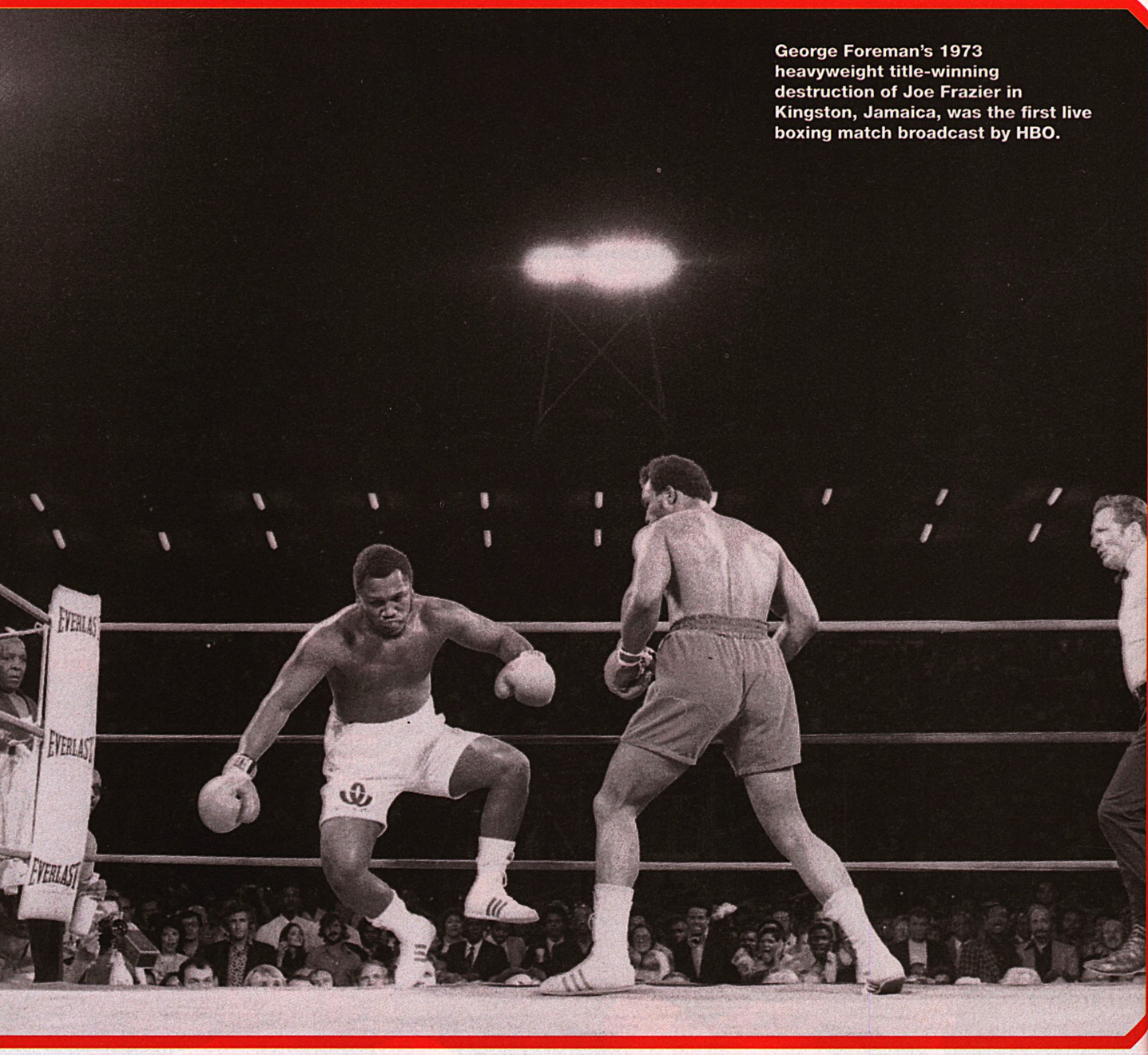
Afterward, Lopez (11-0, 9 knockouts) told Bernardo Osuna of ESPN his plans for next year.

"It is the takeover. The takeover has begun," said Lopez. "2019 you will see me with a world title."

For now, Lopez is The Ring's Prospect of the Year. ★

Lopez wasted no time in brutally dispatching Mason Menard – a veteran who had won 34 of 37 pro bouts – in just 44 seconds on the Lomachenko-Pedraza undercard.

BY MICHAEL MONTERO



George Foreman's 1973 heavyweight title-winning destruction of Joe Frazier in Kingston, Jamaica, was the first live boxing match broadcast by HBO.

HBO LEAVES BOXING

For decades, the letters "H-B-O" were synonymous with boxing. It all began with George Foreman's knockout of Joe Frazier in Kingston, Jamaica, on January 22, 1973. After nearly half a century featuring the biggest names and events in the sport, the former undisputed champion of boxing programming announced this fall that it was hanging up the gloves. The writing had been on the wall for quite some time. Fans had grown frustrated with the declining quality of non-PPV

; BRAEKHUS: JOHN MCCOY/FOREMAN: BETTMANN

fight cards in recent years.

When Floyd Mayweather and the entire Al Haymon stable moved over to Showtime in 2013, HBO faced serious competition for the first time. Another blow was dealt when Top Rank left the network and announced their deal with ESPN in mid-2017. The DAZN and ESPN+ streaming deals this year were the final knockout punch. In the digital age of media and the globalization of boxing in the 21st century, HBO simply failed to adapt.

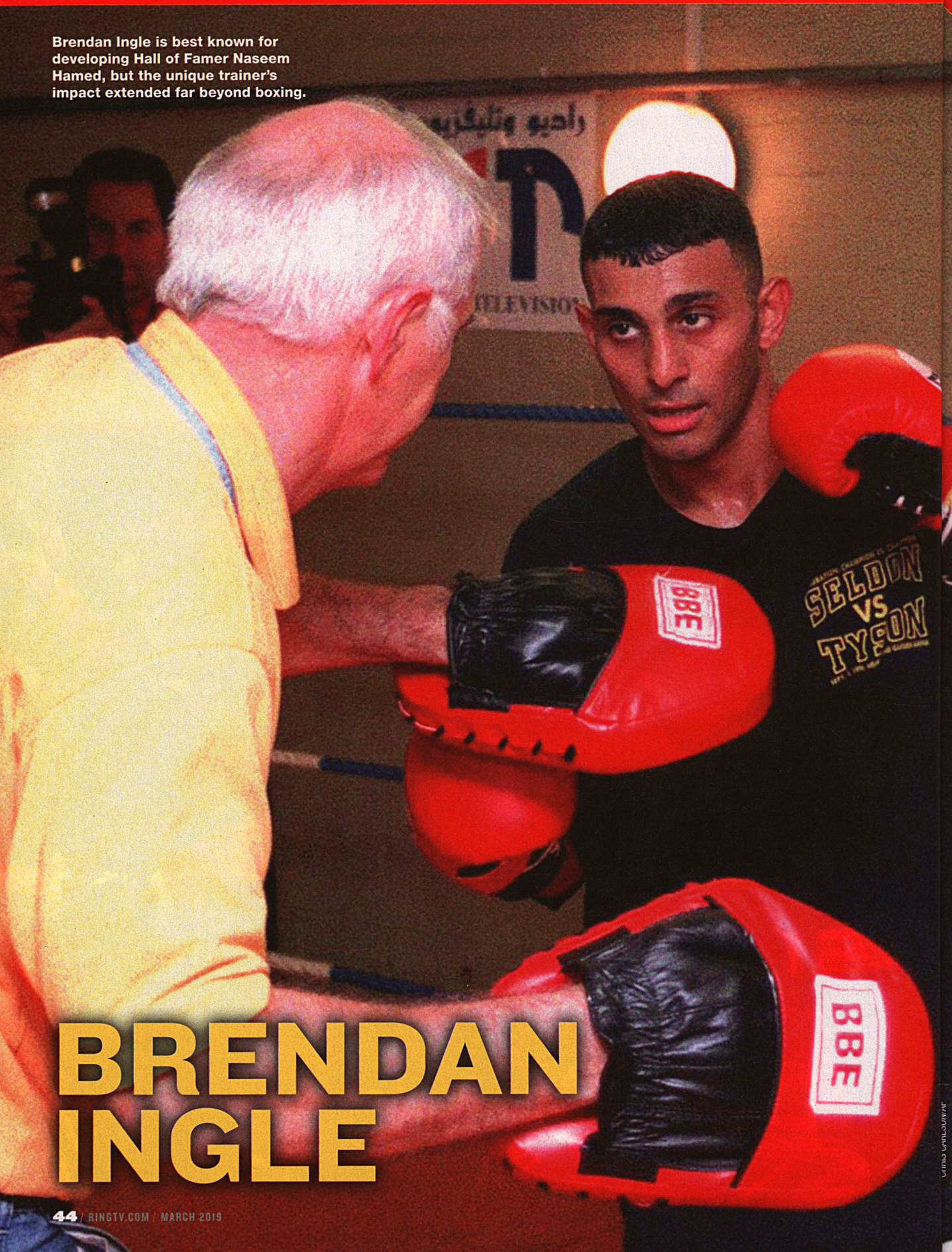
The December 8 HBO boxing finale was more of a whimper than a roar, as a sparse crowd of less than a thousand fans showed up to watch Cecilia Braekhus defend her welterweight titles at StubHub Center in Carson, California. Live viewership for the card averaged just over 300,000, a fraction of the 2 million-plus who watched the Vasiliy Lomachenko-Jose Pedraza lightweight championship the same night on ESPN. Perhaps it is best to remember the former champ in its prime. No lover of the sweet science will ever forget the classic fights on Boxing After Dark, the all-time greats featured on World Championship Boxing and the drama of the Legendary Nights series. ★

RUNNERS UP:

- Canelo Alvarez vs. Gennady Golovkin 2
- World Boxing Super Series
- DAZN launch
- Tyson Fury vs. Deontay Wilder

Cecilia Braekhus' win over Aleksandra Magdziak-Lopes was the final live fight of HBO's 45-year run in boxing.

BY GARETH A DAVIES



Brendan Ingle is best known for developing Hall of Famer Naseem Hamed, but the unique trainer's impact extended far beyond boxing.

BRENDAN INGLE

There are myriad personalities in boxing deserving of Most Inspirational recognition, but the award for 2018 has a deeply deserving recipient in Brendan Ingle. He was special – the Irishman, a svengali, unique as a trainer, a life-changer for so many young people and a pioneer in Sheffield, his adopted city in England, having come there from Dublin in 1957. British boxing lost a faithful, popular servant at the age of 77 in May, Brendan's passing coming after several years of fighting Alzheimer's disease.

For decades, Ingle coached, cajoled and educated in a style all of his own. A former professional boxer himself, in his renowned Wincobank gym on a hillside in the Steel City – converted from a church hall in 1964 – he trained five world champions: Johnny Nelson, Naseem Hamed, Clinton Woods, Junior Witter and Kell Brook. Yet he treated everyone the same. More than just the British, European, Commonwealth and world champions he molded, he left a huge legacy.

There were many ways to describe Ingle – free spirit, maverick, great improviser – but he imprinted a specific style on each of the men he trained, from Hamed and Herol Graham to Nelson and Ryan Rhodes. Even his big heavyweights boxed the same way. They were all light on their toes, in-and-out, masters of range and timing, each of them utterly comfortable with their hands down by their sides. They were matadors with gloves. "Hit and don't get hit" was their mantra.

The most famous pairing was Ingle and Hamed. The Paddy and The Prince, as they were known, famously conquered the boxing world together, winning the WBO featherweight title in 1995 and later collecting IBF and WBC versions along the way before parting ways in 1998. Since the split, they had not spoken. Hamed's father had a grocery store shop just 150 yards from the gym. Hamed had wanted to reconcile with Ingle, and I had even attempted to bring them together, but to no avail. Even since Brendan's passing, Naseem has lamented that fact. The boxer really did want to hug his mentor, reminisce and share time with the man who had guided him from a young boy who walked through the gym doors at just 7 years of age.

Ingle had refused to let Alzheimer's dominate him, and it could not extinguish his fervor for boxing. The gym he created in Sheffield with his sons, Dominic and John, will always have a special place in British boxing history; it became a production line, a conveyor belt of champions and reformed characters. And it will continue to do so. Dominic, himself an elite-level trainer, will ensure that it does.

Brendan Ingle, awarded an honorary doctorate from Sheffield Hallam University and an MBE from the Queen, did not just create champions so skilfully, but changed a community through preaching a way of life – through the skills, discipline and knowledge from a life lived with boxing as the cornerstone. There was a huge turnout for his memorial, with his family unveiling plans to raise £100,000 for a statue of Ingle standing on the edge of a boxing ring. Brook, the former IBF welterweight champion, said: "He's got to be remembered forever."

RUNNERS UP:

- Cecilia Braekhus (first Ring pound-for-pound female champ)
- Don Chargin (boxing maven who was a mentor to many)
- Tyson Fury (mental health awareness)
- Daniel Franco (survived near-fatal head injury and now advocates on behalf of boxer safety)

Ingle and his wife, Alma, whom he was married to for more than 50 years.

DRAW OF THE CENTURY

THE **TYSON FURY-DEONTAY WILDER** FIGHT HAD EVERYTHING A FAN OF BIG-TIME HEAVYWEIGHT BOXING COULD WANT – EXCEPT A WINNER

By **Gareth A Davies**

We complain about judging controversies, of course we do, and we always will, yet however you might have scored Deontay Wilder's dramatic dance with Tyson Fury in the American's eighth defense of the WBC title, one thing cannot be denied: It gave us another narrative and opened up an even wider debate over who deserves the mantle of current heavyweight king. After 12 rounds between two of the unbeaten three heavyweight throne claimants of Wilder, Fury and Anthony Joshua, we still don't know.

At any rate, the title fight between Wilder and Fury, with its London, New York and Los Angeles press tour and two huge personalities, grew into one of the most anticipated heavyweight clashes in modern times, simply because no one really could predict with complete accuracy what would happen when the first bell tolled.

What we knew was that it was a clash of styles: Wilder, the 6-foot-7 titleholder, an out-and-out puncher, vs. the 6-foot-9 Fury, an outlandishly effective boxer and the lineal champion. Both boxers were undefeated – 67 contests between them – both had huge egos, compelling personalities and fascinating back stories. Fury had been No. 1 three years ago. Wilder now claimed it was him. It was Fury, frighteningly bold,

Tyson Fury and Deontay Wilder thrilled the crowd of 17,000-plus in Los Angeles with their dramatic split-draw standoff.

Wilder was certain he'd put Fury down for the count in Round 12, but the lineal champ shocked everyone by getting up and finishing the fight.

who seemingly won the battle of the set pieces during the promotional build-up, climbing into Wilder's head, and in a dark moment after they had squared up at the fight-week news conference, the American's blood seemed to be boiling. On that day in L.A., Wilder gave everyone around him a piece of his mind. At one point, he leaned in toward this correspondent, sunglasses removed, and said: "(Fury) should fear for his life. I want you to look into my eyes. I mean it: fear for his life." He came so close, he became a human hair dryer. But it was all great pantomime.

This was the "Bronze Bomber" of Alabama, the fighting alter ego of the man, who glared outward at the thought of dismantling, physically, the self-proclaimed "Gypsy King." Two weeks earlier, alone with Wilder in his training camp in the Deep South, the tattooed warrior, his flesh glistening after an hour of thumping the pads held for him by the deeply likable Jay Deas, the WBC beltholder had talked of being two people rolled into one: a loving, giving father, yet a cold, destructive spirit with gloves on. Wilder is a fighter who, after all, had knocked out all 39 of his opponents (even if it took two tries with Bermane Stiverne) – his "victims," as he has renamed them – prior to this fight with Fury.

Meanwhile, 2,000 miles away in his camp in Big Bear Lake, California, Fury revealed he had been consuming *The Art of War*, the 2,500-year-old tome attributed to legendary military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu. It was almost prophetic, as two diverse fighting strategies combined for a thrilling spectacle.

Two undefeated heavyweights went into that ring on December 1 at Staples Center in L.A., and after 12 rounds, we are still arguing over who is the best. That's boxing for you. Styles make fights, and indeed champions. Styles can define eras, and even be misleading. Yes, there are profound champions who clearly dominate their weight classes, but this sport of ours thrives on rugged debate and heated opinion. Records and punch statistics can lie. It is a sweet science, but in the same breath an irregular, subjective judging art.

What was fascinating, moreover, in the aftermath of Wilder-Fury, was that it also flushed Anthony Joshua out of his man cave. Rightly, Joshua needed to comment, and the argument now resonates that in spite of his own monumental climb and achievements over the last three years, the British holder of three alphabet titles cannot claim for certain that the No. 1 spot is his. There is the clear sense that Joshua – caught up in boxing politics, egos and promotional deals – may have missed the boat temporarily. It may work in the Briton's favor in the long game. Again, we really don't know. Yet right now, many fans have swung toward the resurrection of Fury for the quite staggering revival of both his body and his mind, and the will and heart in the face of the power of Wilder's raw skills yet devastating power. What Wilder must be admired for after the fight with Fury is his desire for a second skirmish in the war for supremacy.

All in all, Wilder-Fury was a build-up, a fight and even an aftermath to savor. Your correspondent was afforded the privilege of being invited inside Fury's dressing room in the 60 minutes leading into his ring walk, as well as a day inside his house in the Hollywood Hills when he had moved from training at high altitude in Big Bear. It was access to two intimate sessions when the portrait of Fury returning to what he does best, what his family lineage has almost bred him to do naturally, was in focus.

At home in a three-story mansion up a winding lane in Hollywood – his daily gym space, the Wild Card Boxing Club, down in the village – Fury was the most relaxed I had ever witnessed him, and I have covered his professional career from the very first night, when then-promoter Mick Hennessy cooed about a new talent on the undercard of Carl Froch's toe-to-toe world title battle with Jean Pascal in Nottingham. That was 2008. In his Hollywood home, Fury was magnanimous. He talked kindly of Joshua, spoke of his respect for Wilder, and even cheekily praised rival promoter Eddie Hearn for his dress sense, looks and success with aforementioned future foe Joshua.

In a sense, this was the vintage Fury, the one who proclaims, sings, enjoys

skits and entertains. He can do so, as everyone should realize, because his boxing skills (at three inches short of seven feet, remember, and a minimum of 250 pounds) are staggering.

Wilder knows that now. Joshua will get to know that. And goodness knows what kind of shootout and exchanges we shall witness when Joshua and Wilder carry the battle to each other down the line. Fury carried that mood through fight week, selling and promoting the drama at every turn. For his part, Wilder was equally in on the event.

Two weeks out, in that visit to his camp in Alabama, I witnessed, in a deep, resonant interview in which Wilder expounded his theories on life, that we are dealing with another complex man, one who changes at the flick of a switch. He told me that he had "visualized knocking out Fury in 75 different ways." It will be no different when they meet again.

We all saw the switch flick when The Bronze Bomber emerged in fight week. Oh, how he raged, and how Fury goaded his foe. Was it real? Was it theatrics? Only the two men themselves really know deep down. But when it came to the night itself, the two huge heavyweights delivered with aplomb. As the minutes wound down in the dressing room before the ring walk of The Gypsy King – bearing in mind how the man had overcome his paralyzing mental health issues, come back from 30 months in the wilderness and shed 140 pounds in what has been a life-affirming year – a scene unfolded:

Along the wall, on a bench, sat Hall of Fame trainer Freddie Roach, while Ricky Hatton, pacing, stern-faced, chewed hard on his gum. On a stool sat promoter Frank Warren. "We are going to do this tonight," the promoter told me with absolute belief. Fury's huge younger brother, Shane, ever-present in camp, demanded that a television crew move out. It was a solemn mood in there, yet upbeat. Fury sat, then moved, bounced on his feet, his trainer Ben Davison – who deserves deep praise, not the critique that Roach offered afterward – never taking his eyes off the man he was been with almost every day for a year as he helped Fury return from a human wasteland, physically and mentally. Fury had a 15-minute lie-down on a large massage table, stretching, then dressed himself. Boxer shorts, groin protector, those green and gold trunks, taped up around his middle. Music was on constantly, starting with the emotional country vibes of Chris Stapleton – Fury singing along. "This is strange music before a fight, innit?" he said to me as he approached. Yet it was not. It was the music of a return to the fray, to the emotion of a great occasion. As the minutes wound down, we had the mellow hip-hop of Kanye West and Jay-Z, then rousing tunes from Tom Jones and Kaiser Chiefs and then, toward the end, "Thunderstruck" by AC/DC – that great, uplifting heavy-rock track. Fury went on the pads with Coach Davison, going through his combinations, switching from southpaw to orthodox, practicing sequences they had drilled for months. There were no real nerves from the big fighter himself, instead smiles of concentration and mood shifting.

There were two prayers in a huddle, one from Fury himself, another from Asgar Tair, who had been in Fury's corner in Dusseldorf on the night Wladimir Klitschko was dethroned in November 2015. Then, as now, the trusted Tair had inspected the foam under the canvas and had questioned its thickness. A protest was lodged, and it was made thinner. Detail. So important.

In the dressing room, it was attention to detail too. The entire team's eyes were on Fury, as if they would go to his side if anything cracked in the final minutes. But, of course, nothing did, just like the comeback itself. Out they walked to the ring, slow, very slow, soaking up the mood, the respect, the adulation. They reckoned 8,000 folk of the Traveller race had made the journey.

The fight delivered on so many levels. Fury boxed, goaded. Wilder hunted for those tenacious attacks. But it was a Hollywood ending that saw Fury dropped to the canvas twice, both times climbing back up, in the ninth and the 12th rounds – the second time like Lazarus or, as some saw it, aping The Undertaker in WWE wrestling. When the cards came in – 115-111 to Wilder, 114-112 to Fury and 113-113 – boxing hit the news. Draw! Some said it was a robbery. Fury was praised for his heroics, and Wilder was game, a man who said he would do it all over again. The judging of Alejandro Rochin (who tabbed Wilder the winner) was called into question the morning after by Fury's entourage. The fighter himself, his face marked up and his hands sore after the battle, said he had "never seen a worse decision" in his life and that it was "as bad a decision since the first Lennox Lewis and Evander Holyfield fight." Fury's promoter Frank Warren said that there would be an appeal to the WBC, yet six days later, WBC president Mauricio Sulaiman declared that his committee had voted for an immediate rematch.

"Tyson's the No. 1 heavyweight in the world, the people's champion, the winner of that fight. People I respect in boxing – Mike Tyson, Abel Sanchez, Gennady Golovkin, Teddy Atlas – all had it for him," said Warren. "They were all with us, and others saw it that way. People that can actually judge boxing know he was the winner, as do the fans."

The drama of Fury getting up miraculously in the 12th round from that vicious right cross-left hook combination will be used again and again to promote the rematch, as will Fury's moves, making Wilder miss, miss and miss again. Wilder had called this "the biggest fight of my career. The one. This is the one that solidifies my name, especially here in America." It has, and the second meeting will only be bigger. Get it signed, gentlemen. We will all be there. RING

Gareth A Davies is Boxing Correspondent for the London Telegraph.

A LEGACY BUILT FOR TWO

LIKE SO MANY WOMEN BEFORE HER, **KALIESHA WEST** IS LEAVING BOXING WITHOUT GETTING HER DUE, BUT IT WASN'T ALL FOR NOTHING

By **Thomas Gerbasi**

It was a rough day in sparring for Kaliesha West, the second in two weeks. The first time, the pain caused her to miss the next day of work. The second, she called a nurse from her car and described what happened and how she was feeling.

"You need to pull over and call 911," the nurse told West.

The former bantamweight and junior featherweight champion wasn't having it.

"I just wanted to know whether I should apply heat or cold," laughed West, who did go to the emergency room, where a CT scan revealed abnormalities in her vertebrae, the remnants of a January 2011 car accident. She fought six more times after the accident, but as she prepared for a bout this past summer, West caught a couple shots that numbed her limbs, and after being diagnosed with cervical osteophytes (the medical term for bone spurs in the neck), she decided to walk away from the ring at 30.

"Because of the sport that I do, there's nothing I can do to fix this unless I have invasive spinal surgery," West said. "Even if I do that, the probability of being re-injured is higher and I'll need the surgery again. It was a blessing and a curse, because I knew with boxing it would have to take something like that for me to truly step away and say it's over."

If you know who Kaliesha West is, you're one of the diehards. If you don't, blame boxing. Or more specifically, blame the powers that be in the sport that have never embraced women's boxing and who may never embrace it.

The native of Southern California's Inland Empire area had it all to be a star: an entertaining style, looks, charisma and the

Former bantamweight titleholder Kaliesha West has the qualities of a modern TV fighter, but was a decade ahead of her time.

West won the vacant WBO bantamweight title with a seventh-round KO of Angel Gladney in 2010.

willingness to take risks with her career in and out of the ring. Who else can you think of that would fight someone the caliber of Ava Knight ... for free? That's not a figure of speech, as West walked home empty-handed after agreeing to use her purse to pay Knight and take care of a sanctioning fee for the title fight rematch.

She did it again for her final fight in September 2017, a six-round win over Kirstie Simmons.

"The deal was that I was to sell X amount of tickets, and each ticket that I sell I get a percentage of it," West explains. "Well, the ticket money was stolen at the last minute, so after we repaid the ticket money, I didn't get anything for my purse. I think I got like $175 for that fight, if that. I didn't even count."

No regrets?

"No, I just needed to fight," she said. "I didn't care again."

West did care, though. She cared about her own career and the careers of her peers. She wanted to make a difference, make a change, start a revolution in women's boxing. But it never happened. But the fighter remained, and after her win over Simmons, she wanted to take a fight in Mexico, fight for a WBC title and then implement her new master plan.

"In my mind, my work in boxing was nowhere near done and I had a plan," she said. "Since I couldn't get the notoriety I deserved, I'm gonna sit here and let these Olympian girls get the notoriety that I deserved, and then when they're on top and have enough fights to fight me, I'm gonna call them all out, and that's gonna be the big mega-fight and my big break. So I never wanted to officially announce my retirement. They say when you become champion, everybody wants you. I was gonna be one of the ones that want the champion. Because it would be a miracle for me to get the opportunities, notoriety or anything that the Olympian women are getting offered to them because of that word 'Olympian.'"

West's body had other plans. And when you add in the fact that she will be expecting her first child later in 2019, it made her call to walk away even easier. But the devil's advocate must ask: If she had a big-money fight on the horizon, the kind of fight that could make her a superstar, would she get that surgery and go back?

"Oh definitely, one hundred percent," she says without hesitation.

That says it all about women's boxing.

"Now it's just not worth it to me. Now I have everything to lose. I have my health to lose, a normal life to lose, and nothing to gain. Don't get me wrong, if I had an extra $60,000 where I don't need insurance benefits and I don't need to work a full-time job and I can get this surgery and then go back to a gym where I'm treated like a baby, patted on the back by a team of groupies like all these male fighters are, I would love to do that. (laughs) But it ain't like that. It's different."

It is, and that's an indictment of a sport that has not provided the opportunities to women that it has to men. Contrast boxing with mixed martial arts, where women headline UFC events and are paid and marketed on the same level as the men. It's not like that in the ring, and the list of women who have suffered the same fate as West is a long one, with boxers such as Melinda Cooper, Bridgett Riley and Veronica Simmons all relegated to the category of urban legends without reaping the rewards their talent, hard work and marketability should have afforded them. Call them the lost girls. But West isn't

2018 AWARDS: THE BEST OF WOMEN'S BOXING

By Thomas Gerbasi

In several ways, 2018 was the biggest year yet in women's boxing, as the sport finally started to make consistent headway in the mainstream, thanks to the emergence of Olympians Claressa Shields and Katie Taylor, whose appearances on Showtime and DAZN put them in front of more fans than ever before. Add in HBO's willingness to close their boxing program with two appearances from pound-for-pound queen Cecilia Braekhus, a Shields fight and the Heather Hardy-Shelly Vincent rematch. And while there's still work to be done, the steps taken are a good start toward a positive future for the ladies in the ring. As for the work done on fight night, here's the best of the best in 2018.

FIGHTER OF THE YEAR - CLARESSA SHIELDS

In 2016-17, two-time U.S. Olympic gold medalist Claressa Shields announced her arrival to the pro game. In 2018, she arrived, going 4-0 against legitimate competition – not the easiest feat in the admittedly thin 160- and 168-pound weight classes. After defending her super middleweight titles once against Tori Nelson, Shields won two middleweight crowns by beating Hanna Gabriels, then added a third with a victory over Hannah Rankin before defending her trio of belts against Femke Hermans before the end of the year.

FIGHT OF THE YEAR – CLARESSA SHIELDS UD 10 HANNA GABRIELS

Tori Nelson was a solid test for Claressa Shields. Hanna Gabriels was a tougher one, and Shields knew it when she was knocked down for the first time in her career in the first round. This turn of events emboldened Gabriels and fired up Shields, and the two fought at a furious pace throughout their 10-rounder. Yes, Shields won a wide and well-deserved decision, but she had to fight for it.

KNOCKOUT OF THE YEAR – ADELAIDA RUIZ KO 2 BRENDA ENRIQUEZ

Ruiz's first knockdown of Enriquez could have been in the running for the top spot, but the second cemented her win here, as a single left hook put Enriquez out before she hit the deck.

UPSET OF THE YEAR - VIVIANE OBENAUF TKO 4 NATASHA JONAS

Before August 4, British Olympian Natasha Jonas was on her way to a superfight with Katie Taylor. Three knockdowns later, Jonas suffered her first pro loss to Brazil's Viviane Obenauf, putting her boxing future in jeopardy.

ROUND OF THE YEAR – MAIVA HAMADOUCHE VS. VIVIANE OBENAUF - ROUND 1

Four months after upsetting Jonas, Obenauf would be back in the ring against French powerhouse Maiva Hamadouche, and while the Brazilian would ultimately get stopped in five rounds, in the first it was bombs away from both fighters in an action-packed two minutes.

TRAINER OF THE YEAR - ROSS ENAMAIT

The man in the corner of lightweight champion Katie Taylor is a young man, but when it comes to his training methods, he's as old-school as they come, and the bond he has with Ireland's finest has Taylor improving with each fight.

COMEBACK OF THE YEAR – RONICA JEFFREY

Following a two-year layoff, former junior lightweight champion Ronica Jeffrey made her long-awaited return to the ring in 2018 and put two wins in the bank, moving her record to 17-1 and likely setting up bigger and better opportunities in 2019.

PROSPECT OF THE YEAR - MIKAELA MAYER

With Top Rank keeping her busy and moving her along nicely, U.S. Olympian Mikaela Mayer kept the wins coming in 2018, and with power, looks and an ever-growing social media presence, she may have a breakout year in 2019.

EVENT OF THE YEAR - WOMEN'S BOXING ON HBO

HBO was the last network standing when it came to women's boxing, and in 2018, as it closed down its boxing program, they finally opened the doors to the ladies, bringing much-needed attention to the sport.

MOST INSPIRATIONAL – JESSICA MCCASKILL

From homelessness to a world title, Jessica McCaskill's fighting spirit can never be doubted, and in October 2018, the first leg of her journey was completed in her hometown of Chicago when she upset Erica Farias for the WBC junior welterweight title.

bitter. Not now, at least.

"When I was active, I was very, very bitter," she said. "I was so bitter that there were probably promoters and journalists who wanted nothing to do with me because I was talking about equality and money and arguing with everybody. (laughs) And a lot of it had to do with me being in my 20s and still being a squirrel trying to catch a nut, especially when I had done everything that they told me to do. 'Win a national championship and then you'll get it.' 'Be a world champion and then you'll get it.' I did everything and I was very bitter.

"But recently, when I found out about the pregnancy, I started thinking about motherhood and I already started thinking about how I'm going to train my child to be great in whatever it is that he decides to do. And am I going to be able to be the one that stood as an example? Absolutely. And I'm going to make my own little paradise of my memories, I'm gonna blow up photos of me with the world title, of my career, and put them in my office for my child to see. So all of my bitterness is absolutely gone. The world is a mean world; fans can be mean, critics can be mean, and I don't have to deal with that. I get to raise a family without the critique of the world and I can still say I did all that. That was your mama, and she's got the photos to prove it. I'd rather my story to stay exactly the way it is. I'm completely content. I don't need the world to know who I am, because my child is my world, and as long as my child knows who I am and what I've done, that makes me content." RING

FIGHT ROUNDUP

RECENT ACTION AND FUTURE SIGNIFICANCE

BY BRIAN HARTY

VASILIY LOMACHENKO UD 12 JOSE PEDRAZA

Dec. 8, Madison Square Garden Theater, New York

For boxers with roots in Puerto Rico, New York City has long been a place to find a fan base, and Madison Square Garden has been an island away from home for many stars in the past. Wilfred Benitez, Wilfredo Gomez, Felix Trinidad … they were all cheered louder than their English-speaking opponents at the famous Midtown venue. And they were just the precursors to Miguel Cotto, who could've sold out the main arena playing rock-paper-scissors.

Jose Pedraza entered the Hulu Theater at MSG wearing the WBO lightweight belt, having already owned another title at junior lightweight. He is from Puerto Rico. He was booed.

That's even more great news for Vasiliy Lomachenko, right? He's the No. 1 pound-for-pound fighter in the world, a three-division titleholder with just 13 pro fights, and now he has made Ukraine the newest honorary borough of New York City. Yes. Too much good news, in fact. Lomachenko's problem now is that when his opponent doesn't acknowledge his own unworthiness by quitting in between rounds, on-air commentators make it known that they are not impressed. The neighbor who kindly brought a six-pack to the party looks at you and goes, "What the hell, bro? I thought you said this guy was good." (After which that same neighbor wants to talk about how Conor McGregor boxed really well against Floyd Mayweather.) Lomachenko now officially resides in the land of Never Enough.

Vasiliy Lomachenko's knockout streak was broken with "only" a wide decision win over Jose Pedraza, but the Ukrainian still showed why he's at the top of the pound-for-pound list.

PHOTO BY AL BELLO

The lanky Pedraza came out throwing constant jabs, many of which could only loosely be defined as punches and were just there to disrupt, more like building a barricade of desks and chairs between himself and a very dangerous person. Lomachenko either fenced them away or slalomed his way through the minefield to get close, where he popped Pedraza's chin with uppercuts. From the outside he scored with quick lead lefts from his southpaw stance (Pedraza himself switched multiple times in trying to get some kind of toehold) or scored with pinpoint counters. He flashed the occasional flurry.

It wasn't the overwhelming version of Lomachenko, but there was a lot for him to deal with, the first being the talents of Pedraza, who by virtue of being Lomachenko's opponent had been given no chance. The uber-underdog's punches were mostly ineffective, but they kept Loma's hands busy with blocking. It also wasn't the supernaturally lateral version of Lomachenko, who fought mostly in a straight line without the footwork that has made previous foes dizzy trying to find him. Most conspicuously missing was his right hook, the one attached to the shoulder he'd had reconstructive surgery on following his knockout of Jorge Linares in May.

None of that mattered. Pedraza threw 931 punches and landed only 12 percent of them (just 6 percent of his 506 jabs). He landed 80 power punches in the entire fight; Lomachenko landed 42 in the 11th round alone. Overall, those famously accurate power punches connected at a rate of 46 percent, in the ninth round reaching 62 percent. But that 11th round… if our year-end awards had included a category for "best imitation of swarming piranhas," there would've been no contest. It was the one time Lomachenko truly opened the floodgates, hooks and all, and Pedraza was put down twice but survived. The Puerto Rican deserves admiration for his will, and credit for the marks he put on Lomachenko's face; in his own way, Lomachenko said as much afterward.

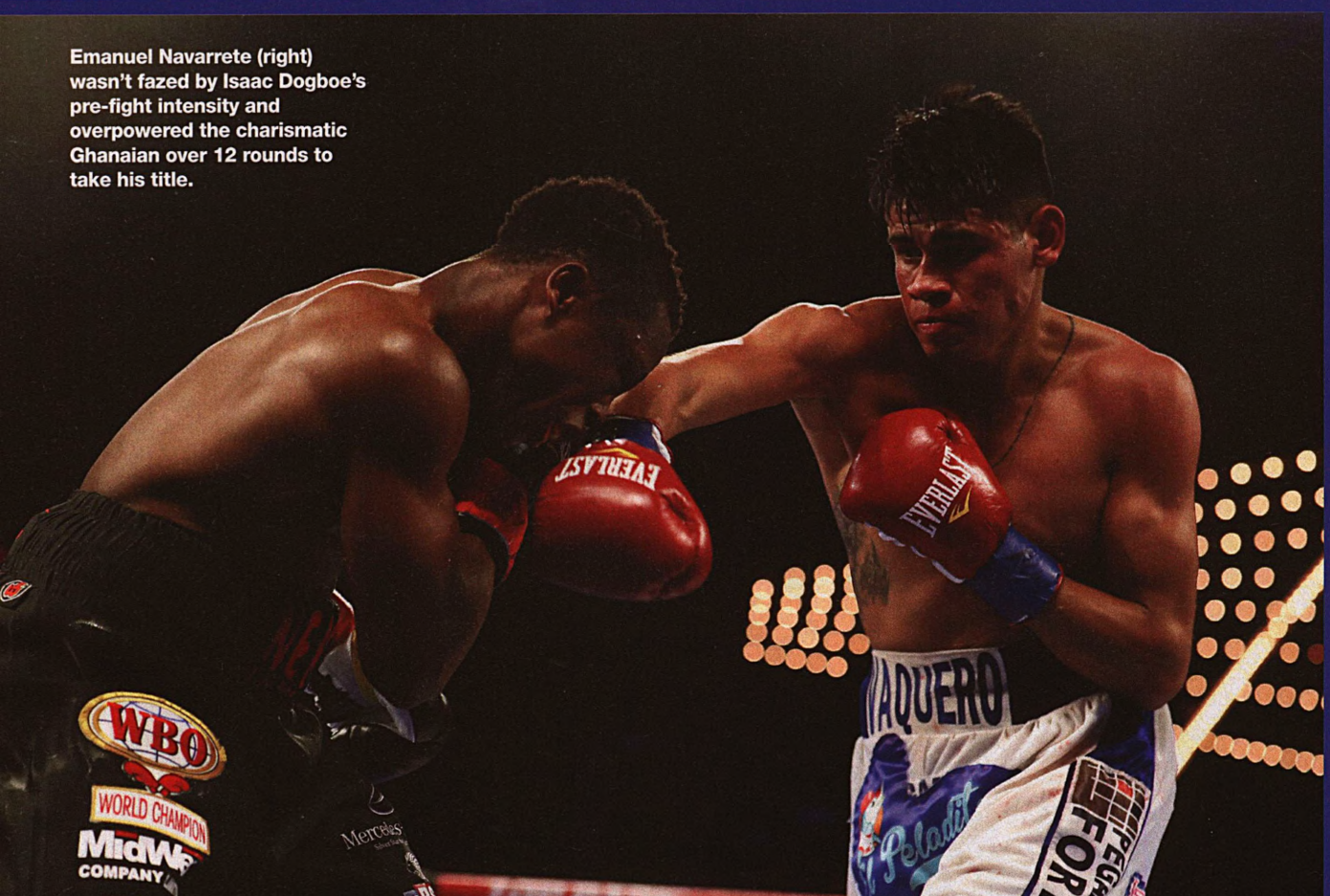
Lomachenko, who will make his next appearance in April against the always-cagey TBA, also deserves credit (he won by scores of 117-109, 119-107 and 117-109). Especially if that's what an "unimpressive" night looks like.

EMANUEL NAVARRETE UD 12 ISAAC DOGBOE

Dec. 8, Madison Square Garden Theater, New York

Isaac Dogboe made a great entrance. He had an awesome robe, he had drummers, dancing, the WBO 122-pound title, a divine mission on his side and a one-word vocabulary to express it: "Neho!" It was the first thing he said when he entered the ring and the last thing he said before the opening bell, and he barked it continuously throughout the time between. Definitions around the web vary, but "Neho!" seems to translate roughly to "There is nothing your mortal ass can do to keep me from winning."

Emanuel Navarrete wasn't having it. The 23-year-old was fighting



Emanuel Navarrete (right) wasn't fazed by Isaac Dogboe's pre-fight intensity and overpowered the charismatic Ghanaian over 12 rounds to take his title.

outside of Mexico for the first time in the United States' most famous boxing venue, but he was a cool cucumber from the start. He was also huge, five inches taller than the compact Ghanaian, and the disparity quickly became a factor. In the second round, Dogboe was frozen in his tracks by a left hook and then stumbled as several more followed. It happened again in the third, this time from farther away as Dogboe tried to retaliate with overhand rights.

By comparison, the champion's punches seemed to have little effect on the bigger man. Dogboe tried upping his aggression in the fourth, then fell into reverse in the fifth to try picking Navarrete off as he pursued. The Mexican did indeed come forward – in fact he charged forward – but not because he was falling for a trap. Just unafraid. He wasn't the picture of refinement – his punches were wide, he sometimes pushed his jab and his forward momentum was a bit reckless (again, you can chalk a lot of that up to a young man seeing a belt within reach) – but he was active, pretty accurate and his style took up a lot of space, too much for his 5-foot-2 opponent to navigate.

At the midway point, Dogboe was still trying to find his way in. He tried working Navarrete's body, but the Mexican disarmed him with uppercuts. He tried again, and in the eighth it looked like the persistence might pay off as Navarrete's ease began to resemble fatigue, but a terrific ninth round was Dogboe's last stand. After that, the swelling around both eyes blossomed into a full liability and the blood began to flow. Before the final round, referee Benjy Esteves Jr. informed Dogboe that he was very close to stopping the fight. That call probably should've come from Dogboe's own corner, aka his father, but that was never going to happen.

Navarrete (26-1, 22 KOs – his only loss a four-round decision in his sixth fight) became "the NEW" titleholder with scores of 116-112, 116-112 and 115-113 in his favor, while a messed-up but gracious Dogboe said (after "Neho!" three times, of course), "I've learned a lesson, that I can't take things easy." He'd like a rematch.

CECILIA BRAEKHUS UD 10 ALEKSANDRA MAGDZIAK-LOPES

CLARESSA SHIELDS UD10 FEMKE HERMANS

Dec. 8, StubHub Center, Carson, California

Cecilia Braekhus and Claressa Shields are extraordinary figures in women's boxing. Braekhus (35-0, 9 KOs) has been defending all four welterweight titles since 2014 (some of them since 2009), and in 2018 became the first woman to receive a championship belt from The Ring – one recognizing her as the pound-for-pound best female fighter in the world. Claressa Shields is a two-time Olympic gold medalist who is already a unified titleholder in two divisions after just eight professional fights. Co-headlining on the last broadcast of HBO Boxing's 45-year run should've been special, and the fighters had every right to expect it could be the kind of breakthrough women's boxing has needed for so long. But other than the actual fight results, nobody got what they deserved on this night.

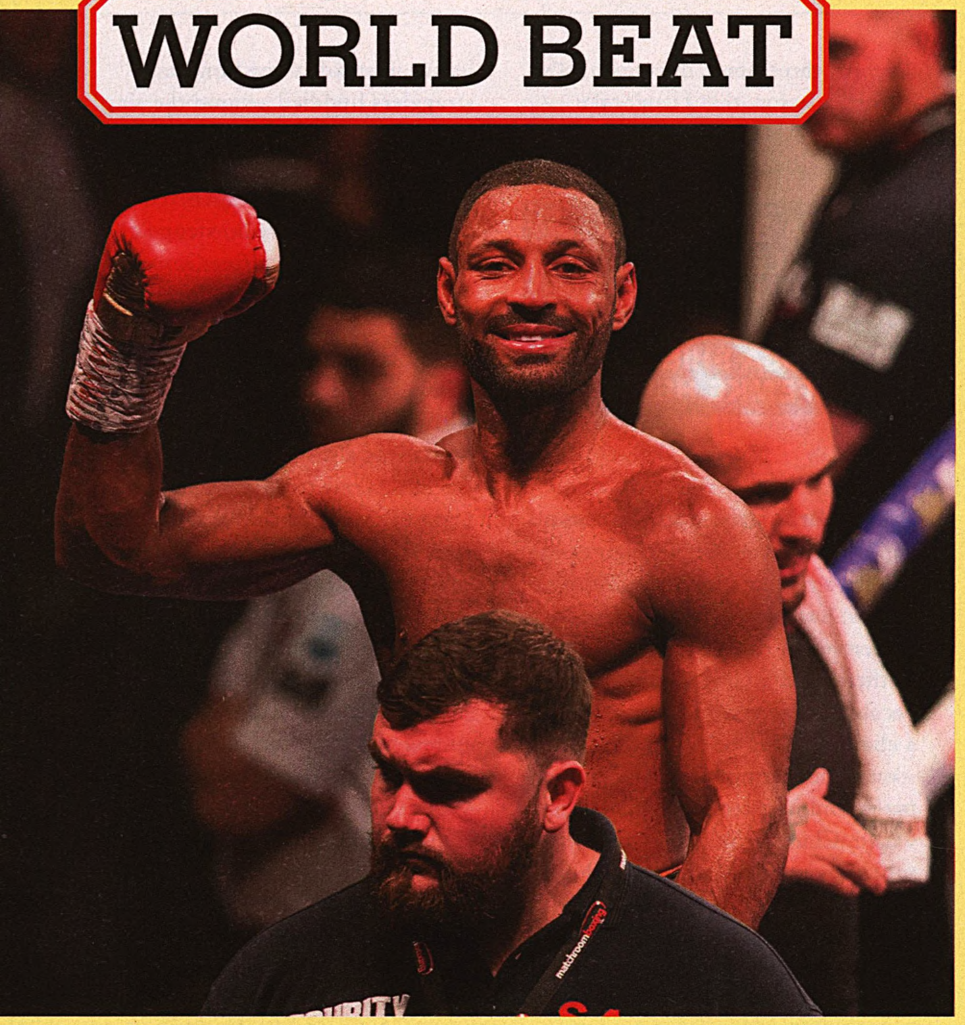
The card was meant to include Roman Gonzalez vs. Pedro Guevara, and, given Los Angeles fans' proven affection for "Chocolatito," one can only assume that Gonzalez withdrawing due to a training injury dealt a heavy blow to the ticket sales. Regardless, just out of respect for the network's contribution to the sport, there should've been celebrities and getting ready to rumble and balloons dropping from the rafters – or the outdoor equivalent of balloons dropping from the rafters. The seats of the little venue, known for its tendency toward memorable matchmaking, should've been packed with nostalgic fans, and HBO should've given them fights worthy of its legacy. Instead, a few hundred stragglers huddled around the ring like a campfire in the darkened arena and watched a tripleheader of mismatches (the third involved Juan Francisco Estrada, who stepped into a featured slot after Gonzalez's removal and stopped Victor Mendez in seven rounds). Max Kellerman even lost his voice and could barely croak a word.

It was all very professional, though, as always; the fighters and the HBO crew treated it like the night of championship combat that it was. For her part, Shields won every round with her superior countering and combination punching and pretty much dominated every other category. She landed a few power shots that looked like they had fight-ending potential, but the punch that hurt Hermans the most and probably left her grateful for two-minute rounds came in the final 10 seconds. With the win, Shields will now get back to planning for a middleweight unification with Christina Hammer, a fight that was originally supposed to happen in November but was scrapped due to a medical issue on Hammer's end.

Braekhus was facing a formidable-looking opponent in Magdziak-Lopes, who appeared to match or exceed her in size, but the experience levels were miles apart. The Polish-born American showed a lot of heart and did win a round on one judge's card, but was far outlanded by the cleaner technique from Braekhus in what was essentially a headhunting contest.

There are a few proposals floating around for the pound-for-pound queen's next opponent, including Amanda Serrano and Katie Taylor, though both are considerably smaller and those matchups would rely on finding common ground. There's also the lingering idea of a fight against MMA star Cris Cyborg. Braekhus is now 37 years old and looking for interesting, lucrative gigs to cap her legacy, so we will keep our fingers crossed and try to forget those empty seats.

WORLD BEAT



Amir Khan is the only fight that makes sense for Kell Brook (pictured).

PLEASE, SHUT UP AND FIGHT

U.K.

BY GARETH A DAVIES

Fed up with this ... we all are. Three years – 2016 to 2018 – are not going to be recalled as great ones for either Kell Brook or Amir Khan, and as the year closed out, it appeared we were no nearer to a resolution on whether these two very prominent former titleholders from Britain would ever settle their differences in a boxing ring. The natural enmity they have for one another and the bragging rights this fight carries should have made it a no-brainer, a mega-money stadium fight, three years ago.

But the sands of time really are now running out. Debates – very public ones – over who is the A-side in this have become dreary on social media platforms, and at this stage in their careers, and in spite of their performances this year, they are still a great match for each other.

Right now, it looks like Khan is the one avoiding the fight, or at least looking at other options. The smart argument, from a neutral corner, is that Khan might prefer losing to an American over Brook. Lose to his British rival, or get knocked out, and it will be an echo similar to the one George Groves must listen to every time Carl Froch talks of their Wembley Stadium rematch in front of 80,000, when Groves was felled by a cannonball right hand.

Nevertheless, Brook looked disinterested and sluggish in claiming a decision win in Sheffield against Australian Michael Zerafa in December, and promoter Eddie Hearn remained hopeful that Khan can be tempted into a lucrative fight. The contest had appeared close to being signed for early 2019, but Khan revealed in the Brook-Zerafa fight week that he had an offer from American Terence Crawford, the WBO welterweight titleholder, with a purse of $5 million.

Brook's win over Zerafa in what was most likely his last appearance in Sheffield – claiming the final eliminator for the WBA junior middleweight world title (118-110, 119-109 and 117-111) – puts him in line, if the Khan fight fails to materialize, to face American Jarrett Hurd. But Brook wants Khan. So do we.

"If I was Amir Khan, I would be on the phone now to take this fight," said Hearn, who, on another note, is part of another new frontier opening up: Italy.

Hearn began that with a show in Florence on November 30, on a card that featured a series of British vs. Italian bouts. Not content to rest on his laurels with the $1 billion, eight-year deal with DAZN, "Matchroom Boxing Italy" will create eight events per year for the coming eight years. That gives Matchroom 50 shows per year globally.

★★★

There was great sadness about the passing of Bunny Sterling – born Basil Sylvester Sterling in 1948 – who in 1970 became the first Caribbean immigrant to win a British title at middleweight. Sterling also became European middleweight champion six years later. Historically, though, Sterling is a significant figure in what has become a conveyor belt of West Indian (Caribbean) boxing success stories in the U.K., a long list that includes the likes of Frank Bruno, Dennis Andries, Kirkland Laing, Chris Eubank, Nigel Benn and

Dillian Whyte. But there have been so many Caribbean/British boxers we adored.

Sterling was a child of what is often called "the Windrush Generation," coming to London at 6 with his parents from Jamaica. After World War II, the British government encouraged mass immigration from the countries of the British Empire and Commonwealth to fill shortages in the labor market. Many West Indians were attracted by better prospects in "the mother country." Bunny was one of the first Caribbean fighters to come to the U.K. and become popular and a success, which gave him a place in history by bringing change to British society in regard to perceptions of race, color and creed. Winston McKenzie described Sterling, trained by George Francis, in the British publication Boxing News a fortnight after his death as "Britain's answer to Muhammad Ali – a slick, fast-box fighter who had the ability to slice your eyebrow before you could blink." The saddening – even maddening – thing was that Sterling passed away at 70, according to McKenzie, "poverty-stricken, heartbroken and lonely." None of our treasured fighters should leave life that way, and we must ensure it does not happen by keeping them relevant in the sport we love long after they have retired.

★★★

Footnote 1: What was Freddie Roach doing on Fox Sports 1's Fair Game criticizing Ben Davison on U.S. television after the big heavyweight showdown? It was one of the most mystifying moments in the aftermath of Deontay Wilder vs. Tyson Fury. What was in Roach's mind? Was it a bid to become Fury's trainer? Or was it meant as a criticism for Davison to pick up on? Certainly he would have been better advised sharing his thoughts privately with Davison himself. Roach received a slew of invective and poor publicity on social media afterward. I was around Davison quite a lot during this build-up, and the young trainer, who turned 26 during the fight week, was neither overawed nor protective of his own territory with either Roach or Ricky Hatton around. Indeed, Davison looked to have done a fine job. Frank Warren spoke to me after those comments. "It's outrageous," he told me. "Ben Davison did a fabulous job. I'm really disappointed he'd say that. I listened to the Davison corner. He was calm, collected and he did a stellar job for Tyson. I was a bit apprehensive about the young kid at first, but he was an old head in there. Roach was making a play for Tyson."

Footnote 2: We should not worry that Tyson Fury was left out at the BBC's annual Sports Personality of the Year Awards, in which the British public votes. It's likely the nominating panel had not forgotten the homophobic, sexist comments made by the boxer three years ago. They perhaps failed to see the bigger picture of Fury's overcoming mental health issues. In 2017, I thought Anthony Joshua was a shoo-in, after his famous victory over Wladimir Klitschko. But he was not even in the running.

We have to remember that we are aficionados and observers of a "minority" sport that is rarely watched by the mainstream on network television. Gone are the days of Muhammad Ali, who did win the BBC Overseas award three times, and who, had he been a Briton, would have certainly earned the domestic honor at least once. The only boxers to have won it since it began in 1954 were Henry Cooper (twice), Barry McGuigan, Lennox Lewis and Joe Calzaghe.

The trouble is that when boxing does reach that huge mainstream demographic, it tends to be due to one controversy or another. C'est la vie. The fans of boxing know what Tyson Fury achieved in 2018.

That's what counts.

JAPAN

BY NICK SKOK

In 2018, superstar Ryota Murata lost convincingly while Ryoichi Taguchi, Daigo Higa, Ryuya Yamanaka and Ryosuke Iwasa all lost their world titles. Japan's fighters will look to turn over a new leaf in 2019.

That positive trend started with Murata holding a press conference in Tokyo to announce his plans to continue his boxing career. The popular middleweight had a major setback against Rob Brant in his last outing, suffering a defeat that some thought he couldn't – or potentially shouldn't – come back from. An immediate rematch is not likely, though with some time off, Murata is expected to resume training and return sometime in the second quarter of 2019.

★★★

Former junior lightweight titleholder Takashi Uchiyama has officially opened the doors to his new gym in Tokyo, aptly named KOD Lab Fitness Boxing. The initials "K.O.D." stand for the fighter's nickname, "Knockout Dynamite." Bringing light to Uchiyama's venture is Japanese boxing phenom Kazuto Ioka, who chose this gym to train in for his title fight against Donnie Nietes.

★★★

The foundation is already being laid for what could easily be the biggest all-Japanese matchup of 2019. Ken Shiro and Hiroto Kyoguchi, both standout junior flyweights, held a public sparring session at Korakuen Hall ahead of their respective title bouts scheduled for New Year's Eve week. On the championship level, it's not as common as one might think for two top-rated Japanese fighters to go at it. If and when it happens, fireworks can be expected. This much was certain last year when two other top-notch Japanese pugilists squared

off in a Fight of the Year contender – you might remember Kosei Tanaka's impressive title-winning performance against a very game Sho Kimura.

A fight between Shiro and Kyoguchi, both undefeated, still looks to be difficult to make with each being tied to different network contracts. The sparring itself shows cooperation between their gyms' presidents and offers fans hope that this one could be made. Adding to the intrigue is the fact that it could very well turn out to be a title-unification fight.

★★★

Another highly anticipated all- Japanese title bout is looking to get made for the first quarter of 2019, most likely in March, for the WBO flyweight title. Tanaka expressed to The Ring (following his win over Kimura last September) his desire to face Ryoichi Taguchi, and he might receive his wish. Taguchi was aiming for a rematch with Hekkie Budler, whom he lost his Ring/IBF/WBA titles to. However, as weight issues for Taguchi made that fight less likely, Watanabe Gym stablemate Kyoguchi was able to slide into the picture for a title opportunity against Budler. Taguchi in turn will move up to flyweight for the first time by taking the Tanaka bout. A junior flyweight unification fight between Tanaka and Taguchi had been agreed to last year before injuries to Tanaka changed those plans.

★★★

Tomoki Kameda is hoping to become the next Japanese fighter to be crowned world titleholder in 2019. Kameda defeated Abigail Medina via unanimous decision in November to become the WBC junior featherweight interim beltholder. The WBC's full champion, Rey Vargas, has been sidelined with an injury. A fight to solidify the championship is expected next year, possibly after a Vargas comeback fight to shake off the rust.

★★★

Daigo Higa has been seen training lately. The fighter was suspended indefinitely last April when he missed weight in his last fight, which saw the Okinawan lose his WBC flyweight title to Cristofer Rosales. Higa will undoubtedly move up in weight, quite possibly two classes to bantamweight, upon his return.

★★★

Kenichi Ogawa is also set to return following his one-year suspension. Ogawa was the first Japanese fighter to be suspended for a failed drug sample. It has been widely accepted that the drug detected in tests was probably an antibiotic used for a skin condition Ogawa suffers from. Japanese fighters are trained in a style of discipline that focuses on honor; drug use of any kind is highly rare in Japanese sports, as the dishonor that would come from its publicity would stain deeper than any defeat. A well-battled loss is much more acceptable for one's reputation compared to the stigma of being branded a cheater.

★★★

Former three-time strawweight titleholder Katsunari Takayama has been granted amateur status from the Japan Amateur Boxing Federation, despite the fact that he's a retired professional and 35 years of age. Takayama is aiming to compete in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. He's the only Japanese boxer to capture world titles from all four sanctioning bodies (IBF, WBA, WBC and WBO).

Contact Nick Skok on Twitter @NoSparring.

SOUTH AFRICA

BY DROEKS MALAN

Simpiwe Khonco, The Ring's No. 5-ranked strawweight, took on Filipino southpaw Joey Canoy on December 2 at the Orient Theatre in East London. Canoy was coming off two wins, including a decision over former title challenger Melvin Jerusalem.

Khonco (19-5, 7 knockouts) started boxing behind his jab, possibly shading the first round, while Canoy launched flurries that were mostly blocked.

In the second, all hell broke loose when Khonco decided to take the fight to Canoy, banging combinations to the head and body. As he was throwing a left hook downstairs, Canoy responded with a cracking right hook that dropped Khonco heavily. Khonco was clearly hurt but managed to beat the count. There were tense moments as Canoy opened up on his reeling opponent, but the local man survived.

Khonco pulled himself together in the third stanza, getting back to his jab and nailing Canoy with straight rights, winning the round. He appeared to be out of the woods, but the fight took yet another turn in the following round.

As Canoy jumped on the attack, their heads came together, opening a deep gash on the top of Khonco's forehead. It was ruled an accidental headbutt, but as Canoy piled on the pressure, the cut started spurting blood in every direction. The fight was stopped on advice from the ringside doctor and declared a technical draw, with four rounds not yet being completed.

It was an unsatisfactory end to what was shaping up to be a great fight. To me it looked like Khonco was gaining the upper hand before the headbutt interfered, although I can't argue with the Canoy camp members who felt that they were on their way to a stoppage victory.

Hopefully, Khonco's perceived vulnerability might entice WBC beltholder Wanheng Menayothin to finally give him a title shot.

★★★

On December 8 at Emperor's Palace, Gauteng, unbeaten welterweight Thulani Mbenge (15-0, 12 KOs) continued his winning ways when former IBF lightweight titleholder Miguel Vazquez retired in his corner at the end of the ninth round. Mbenge becomes only the second man, after Josh Taylor, to stop the tricky "Titere."

Mbenge started the fight behind his hard jab, with long rights to the body mixed in, while Vazquez retaliated with a few sporadic combinations, which Mbenge shrugged off. The difference in power was glaring.

Mbenge continued in his familiar power-boxing style with jabs, rights to the body and head and the odd left hook mixed in, while Vazquez ducked and dived and responded with mostly ineffective flurries.

Mbenge backed Vazquez to the ropes with a short burst of punches in the fourth, appeared to hurt him and then settled down again.

The pattern for the fight was set: Mbenge landed the telling, clear blows and Vazquez did just enough to stay in the fight with an odd flurry or single right. Sitting on his stool at the end of the seventh, Vazquez had the look of a beaten fighter.

He put in a last-ditch effort in the eighth, possibly shading it, but that only served to wake up Mbenge in the ninth. After being hurt and taking punishment to the body, Vazquez elected to call it a day during the break.

Mbenge delivered the solid, workmanlike performance expected of him against a good opponent and will be making his U.S. debut in 2019 under promoter Lou DiBella. He is knocking on the door of the top 10, but if he is to compete against the top names, he will have to stay true to his nickname of "Evolution." He still tends to load up on his shots and leaves gaps when he misses, which a good counterpuncher with power will exploit. His attack can also be predictable at times.

Still, a 15-fight pro career with stoppage wins over Diego Chaves and Miguel Vazquez is nothing to be sneezed at, and he is a welcome addition to the welterweights.

★★★

On the same card, Thomas "Tommy Gun" Oosthuizen had a rematch with Thabiso "The Rock" Mchunu, with both the South African and African cruiserweight titles on the line. Oosthuizen had danced and shoeshined his way to a close victory in September, but this time it was all Mchunu, who put up a brilliant performance.

Mchunu got off to a fast start and maintained the momentum throughout the fight. He was the aggressor, closed the gap and stayed on Oosthuizen, pounding him with combinations. It came as no surprise when Mchunu won a wide unanimous decision.

The only good thing that can be said about Oosthuizen's performance is that he displayed an incredible chin. Mchunu, after going through a bad patch, looked as good as ever, and with Aleksandr Usyk on his way to heavyweight, one has to wonder whether he may yet have another international run left in him.

★★★

Unbeaten (13-0, 8 KOs) junior lightweight Azinga Fuzile concluded a busy year on December 9 by stopping Ibrahim Class from Tanzania in seven rounds at the Orient Theatre.

The 23-year-old prospect has his sights set on IBF titleholder Tevin Farmer. RING

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CORONATION NIGHT

Evander Holyfield had turned Olympic bronze into professional gold by dethroning Dwight Muhammad Qawi and Ricky Parkey for the WBA and IBF cruiserweight titles, respectively. In his final world championship bout at 190 pounds (the original cruiserweight limit), Holyfield battered WBC titleholder Carlos De Leon (right) for eight rounds and emerged as the undisputed champion. There were no knockdowns, although Holyfield was pitching a shutout at the time of the stoppage. From there, "The Real Deal" would move on and establish heavyweight domination. The Holyfield-De Leon bout took place at Caesars Palace Sports Pavilion on April 9, 1988. RNG

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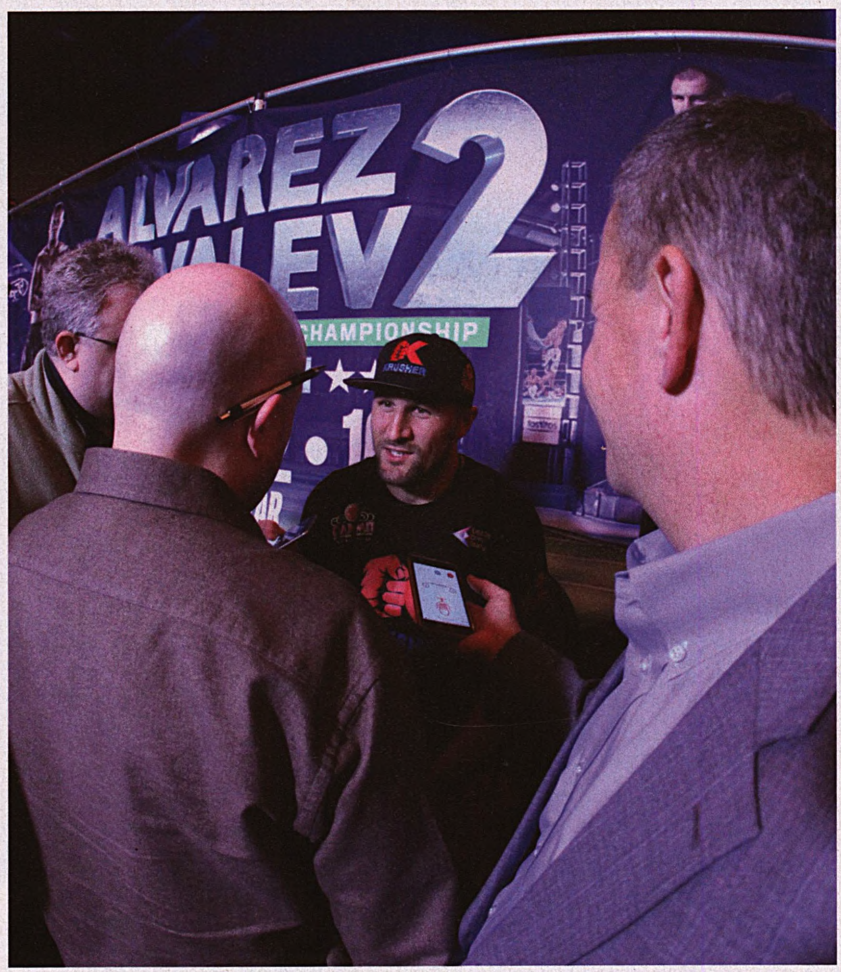

Former light heavyweight titleholder Sergey Kovalev addresses the media at a presser for what could be his last stand: his rematch with Eleider Alvarez.

FEBRUARY

FEB. 2 – Eleider Alvarez vs. Sergey Kovalev, light heavyweights (for Alvarez's WBO title), Frisco, Texas (ESPN).
FEB. 16 – Leo Santa Cruz vs. Miguel Flores, featherweights (for Santa Cruz's WBA title), Los Angeles (Fox).
FEB. 23 – Anthony Dirrell vs. Avni Yildirim, super middleweights (for vacant WBC title), Minneapolis, Minnesota (Fox Sports 1).

MARCH

MARCH 9 – Shawn Porter vs. Yordenis Ugas, welterweights (for Porter's WBC title), Las Vegas (Fox).
MARCH 16 – Errol Spence Jr. vs. Mikey Garcia, welterweights (for Spence's IBF title), Arlington, Texas (Fox PPV).
MARCH 24 – Lamont Peterson vs. Sergey Lipinets, welterweights, Oxon Hill, Maryland (Fox Sports 1).

APRIL

APRIL 12 – Vasiliy Lomachenko vs. TBA, lightweights (for Lomachenko's Ring, WBA and WBO titles), location TBA (ESPN).
APRIL 13 – Anthony Joshua vs. TBA, heavyweights (for Joshua's IBF, WBA and WBO titles), London (DAZN).
APRIL 13 – Peter Quillin vs. Caleb Truax, super middleweights, Minneapolis, Minnesota (Fox Sports 1).
APRIL 20 – Danny Garcia vs. Adrian Granados, welterweights, location TBA (Fox).

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